

NUCLEAR CRISES IN KOREA: WHY THEY ARISE AND HOW TO RESOLVE THEM

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Analyzing the current situation around the North Korean nuclear problem, the author argues that both the DPRK and the US are both responsible for the development to a stage dangerous for the world peace. Comparing the present crisis with the similar one of 1993-1994, he underlines that both of them were caused by US attempts to block further detente in Korea because the process could undermine US's forward deployment strategy and TMD scheme in the region. He presents Russia's attitude toward a multilateral approach, proposed by the United States. He explains how developments in Iraq could make the North Korean leadership come to the conclusion that nuclear weapons is the best deterrent and identifies factors which will prevent the use of force for resolving the nuclear problem. On the basis of the analysis of these factors and positions of the US, China, the DPRK, the ROK, Japan and Russia the paper offers three possible developments of events on the Korean peninsula: a comprehensive settlement of the basic disagreements, a military conflict and a long negotiating process. The last one is considered the most probable one. The DPRK's behavior testifies that its leaders have so far made stakes on dialogue with the purpose of easing external threats to the regime

and getting economic assistance in order to maintain stability within the country in a time of cautious economic reforms. Under the circumstances, Russia expects the ROK to play a more active role in search for peaceful solution of the current situation through promotion of inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation.

I. Introduction

The so-called “North Korean nuclear problem” appeared almost settled in the 20th century, but has reappeared as the epicenter of world politics. To develop an adequate course of action on this question and to ensure support for it among the public, it is necessary to understand the essence of the present conflict between the US and the DPRK.

The task became of special importance because with the beginning of the current “nuclear crisis” in Korea, and many analysts and the mass media in Russia and other nations abroad, following the US approach, have hastened to “shift arrows” at the DPRK, not having taken the trouble at all to read the texts of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Agreed Framework (AF) or other US-DPRK agreements. Moreover, the tendency has appeared to disperse a certain opinion of “the world community” regarding this problem - a position of the most hawkish wing of the Bush administration, ignoring views expressed by more moderate and responsible American politicians and observers, let alone third party countries. Some authors have openly attempted to “demonize” North Korea. A number of hot-heads referred to dealing with Pyongyang as dealing with terrorists. This approach excluded from the “world community” not only Russia and China, but many other countries as well as the United Nations,

which was supporting settlement of the problem by means of dialogue and negotiations.¹

Russia has consistently supported preservation of the non-proliferation regime and the denuclearized status of the Korean peninsula. At the same time, Moscow has its own, sometimes not coincident with Washington, opinions of the causes of the present nuclear crisis in Korea and methods for its settlement.²

II. Mutual Claims of the US and DPRK: Whom to Blame?

The foremost demand on the part of the US is the demand for the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons program. Of course, one can talk only about the military component of the nuclear program. Thus far, we know of the DPRK's nuclear weapons only from US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, J. Kelly, but his word has been subject to doubt.³

As to the peace program of scientific research and development of atomic energy, the NPT does not forbid any country from developing peaceful atomic energy, and also urges nuclear nations to assist the non-nuclear states in the field. The founding of the Korean peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) in 1995 and the consent of its members - US, Japan and ROK - to build the atomic power station in the DPRK meant none other than recognition by the West of North Korea's right to possess an atomic power industry, certainly under the

1 *Kommersant*, January 13, 16, 2003; *Izvestiya*, February 3, 2003; *New Time*, No. 4, 2003, pp. 24-27.

2 The Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, January 10, 2003; Official Spokesman for Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Alexander Yakovenko Replies to Questions from Russian Media on North Korean Problems, May 28, 2003 (<http://www.mid.ru>).

3 *Japan Times*, May 1, 2003.

IAEA's control.

Accusations directed at Pyongyang of so-called "nuclear blackmail" or "extortion of oil," assistance, etc., from the "world community" became commonplace. The DPRK does not demand anything from the "world community," but insists on fulfilling through the US's obligations under bilateral agreements and the UN Charter. The US and their allies have agreed on deliveries of oil fuel and construction of an atomic power station in North Korea just because they had no legal ground to request the termination of DPRK's national atomic power program and were compelled to "redeem" it. The bargain was fixed in the AF between DPRK and the US on October 21, 1994. The demand for indemnification for the refusal of realizing the legitimate right can hardly qualify as blackmail.

Nowadays, Washington prefers to limit the American obligations under the AF to two basic points: Promises to organize an international consortium for construction of an atomic power plant with two Light-Water Reactors (LWR) and to deliver before start-up of the first of (planned for 2003) 500,000 tons of oil fuel annually.

Instead, Pyongyang was obliged to "freeze" a 5-megawatt graphite-moderated reactor and other related facilities in Yongbyon where it could produce weapons plutonium, stop construction of two more reactors of the same type with capacities of 50 Mwt and 200 Mwt to remain a member of NPT, and abide with provisions of the Declaration of North and South Korea signed in 1991 on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.⁴

The US is attempting to convince the world that they have met their obligations under the AF, but the DPRK has failed to do so. However, if this is true, why did the US wait almost 8 years until August 2002 for the beginning of construction of the atomic power station in the DPRK? Incidentally, in the so-called "letter of guarantee"

4 See the text of the Agreed Framework in *KCNA*, Pyongyang, October 22, 1994.

sent by former US President Clinton to North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, Americans promised to build the plant, even if for any reason KEDO was unable to cope with the task.⁵

The matter of concern was that the Clinton administration was slow with construction, based on the belief of those analysts who assured that after Kim Il-sung's demise in July 1994, the North Korean regime would quickly break up. As for the Republicans, after coming to power in the beginning of 2001, they entirely partisan by ideological reasons, anathematized everything that was done by the Democratic administration.

Most of all, the Bush administration was reluctant to recall that the AF contains non-proliferation articles that rather precisely specified US political obligations before the DPRK. Washington promised, firstly, to give Pyongyang "formal guarantees" - that the US would not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the DPRK, and secondly, to move to "full normalization of political and economic relations" with North Korea.⁶

Neither the first nor the second has yet been fulfilled. On the contrary, after Bush came to power, North Korea was included in the "axis of evil" listed among the countries selected for US preventive strikes including nuclear attacks.

Observing all these developments taking place, North Korea did not sit idly by. As a "trump-card" for future bargaining or (depending on how events evolve) as a deterrent, it started the second parallel program to produce materials for nuclear weapons (the first plutonium program which had been "frozen" until December of 2002 by the AF). However, we know about the latter project only from the words of Americans. According to US intelligence leakage, North Korea's nuclear program is to produce enriched uranium in exchange for mis-

5 See the text of the letter in *KCNA*, Pyongyang, October 22, 1994.

6 See the text of the Agreed Framework in *KCNA*, Pyongyang, October 22, 1994.

sile technologies imported the necessary equipment from Pakistan. Nonetheless, Washington was not in a hurry to impose any sanctions on Islamabad for producing nuclear weapons and proliferation of nuclear technologies in exchange for missile workmanship, Pakistan, a *de facto* nuclear power and an important US ally in the “antiterrorist operation” in Afghanistan.

Under the pretext of North Koreans admitting they had been engaged in the enrichment of uranium, the US decided to stop oil fuel deliveries to the DPRK and to finish with the AF. In return, Pyongyang expelled IAEA inspectors, withdrawing from NPT and reactivating the “frozen” facilities at Yongbyon.

The Agreed Framework does not forbid uranium enrichment directly. However, Americans point out that one must recognize, not without good reasons, that the DPRK has promised in the document to observe the Declaration on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, in which both Koreas promised to refrain from processing plutonium and enrichment of uranium.

If we accept the linkage as being legitimate, then the same should be said concerning references contained in the AF regarding the necessity to abide with principles of the US-DPRK joint statement of June 11, 1993. The document, besides the “refusal of use of force or threat by force,” calls for the US and the DPRK to “respect sovereignty” and to “not interfere with the internal affairs” of each other, and to “continue dialogue between the governments” of the two countries on the basis of “equality and fairness.”⁷

How can anyone consider a 20-month-long boycott of dialogue with Pyongyang, threats addressed to the DPRK, public insults of its leaders, hints of introduction of a sea blockade, the US’s course for regime change, and toughening of sanctions against this country to not contradict these principles and not break the AF?

7 *Rodong Sinmun*, June 12, 1993.

A similar picture exists with numerous accusations concerning the DPRK's infringement of its "international obligations." One of the basic propositions of international law reflected in the NPT (article X) states that when a country is faced with threats to its existence, it has the right to forgo any treaty and use all means available for the protection of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. North Koreans have taken advantage of such a right. Certainly, an undesirable precedent has been created. However, the DPRK has been pushed to exercise the measure by none other than the United States.

The US's reproaches addressed to the DPRK and other countries concerning their observance of international obligations and international law are not too convincing because the track record of the US in this sphere is not spotless - they unilaterally left the ABM Treaty, withdrawing their signature under the Kyoto protocol - a major document for mankind's future on preventing global warming, refused to join the International Convention on Land Mine Ban or to accept jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.

III. Hidden Aspects of the Crisis

There are striking similarities between the ongoing nuclear crisis in Korea and the one that occurred here in 1993-1994. Both were results of US attempts to hinder the further normalization of relations between South and North Korea and the relaxation of tension on the Korean peninsula.

Nowadays, as well as in the beginning of the 1990s, continuation of detente in Korea inevitably would lead to questioning motives of preservation of foreign military presence in South Korea. The withdrawal of US troops from the ROK would remove a cornerstone from under the US strategy in NEA and the Asia-Pacific region as a whole, which is based on bilateral military alliances with Japan and the ROK

and advanced deployment of the American armed forces in these countries.

Also, the disappearance of the so-called “North Korean missile threat” would expose the US’s actual plans, which envisage, along with the NMD, to neutralize nuclear missile deterrent potentials of China and Russia.

The difference between the two crises is that the US wants to use the present one to disarm the DPRK according to the “Iraq scenario.” This would make it possible for the US to establish control from a strategic viewpoint area of Asia situated right on the borders of Russia, China and Japan - three powers potentially still capable to challenge the American hegemony. The advancement of the US armed forces with their precision weaponry to almost within 1400km of the Chinese border with North Korea and the 17km within the Russian Federation would result in cardinal changes in the military-political situation in this region and the whole of the Asia-Pacific region.

IV. Why a Multilateral Approach?

Washington is refusing to hold bilateral dialogue with Pyongyang because, allegedly, the US honored its side of the AF, but North Korea did not. The real picture is somewhat different:

The main reason for the US’s sudden interest in multilateral efforts is due to the aspiration to evade any responsibility for provoking the present situation in Korea. Washington does not have enough honesty to admit that the US is far from honoring its own obligations under the AF. The multilateral format is called on to create the impression that the problem is not of mutual claims between the US and the DPRK concerning quite concrete bilateral agreements, but the DPRK’s attempts to “blackmail” the rest of the world. A major issue is that not only Russia and China, but even South Korea does not acknowledge

this threat and, despite the Bush administration's insistence, they do not believe that Pyongyang is going to attack anyone.

The choice in favor of a multilateral approach was also caused by domestic political considerations of the Bush administration. Congress always financed the US's obligations under the AF very reluctantly. However, these days it is almost impossible to receive money for this purpose. Under a multilateral settlement, it would be much easier for the US to reduce this burden or to shift it completely onto others. In the case of bilateral dialogue with the DPRK, Washington would bear the burden of all expenses.

The US's interest in multilateral efforts in Korea, including attempts to refer the problem to the UN Security Council, looks especially suspicious nowadays. The US attack against Iraq in spite of the UN Security Council's position confirmed that Washington is ready to act without regards to international organizations, and even contrary to the opinion of the majority of the international community.

The clue seemingly can be found in Secretary of State C. Powell's and other members of the Bush administration's remarks made as early as the end of 2002, when they began discussing the US's intention to follow the Iraq scenario for solving the North Korean nuclear problem. As we already have seen, the plan envisages securing a maximum rigid UN Security Council resolution in order to put constant pressure both upon the disliked regime and the UNSC member-countries, and later in proper time (by US discretion), to declare that even only one resolution would be enough to allow the US to lash out unilaterally.

Washington's motives were obvious. Therefore, essentially, not excluding the multilateral approach to the crisis solution, other parties concerned and primarily Russia and China, specified that US-DPRK bilateral dialogue should play a leading role. The multilateral approach is meaningful only when it is not staged as a kind of certain tribunal intended to "punish" North Korea, but instead, be a forum to seek a mutually acceptable solution and guarantee its implementation.

The attitude toward the multilateral approach has changed slightly, though most likely for tactical reasons only in April 2003 under the influence of a victorious and rather quick US military campaign in Iraq.

The Chinese, apparently, began to be seriously concerned that the Americans, intoxicated by their military success, may continue with similar steps on the Korean peninsula. Beijing feared facing a lonely veto option in the UNSC. Thus, China confirmed the offer made earlier on its intermediary for a meeting between the US and DPRK representatives in Beijing, and increased pressure on Pyongyang to compel them to agree to a multilateral format.

It would appear that North Koreans received due impression from the US's determination to wage war, not taking into consideration the position of allies such as France and Germany. Pyongyang apparently was shocked by the absence of resistance on the part of the Iraqi military. Finally, the DPRK declared that "it will not adhere to any particular dialogue format" if the US makes a "bold switchover" in their policy towards the DPRK.⁸

Washington has blinked too. The Americans went to Beijing notwithstanding earlier declarations to the effect that the US would not sit at the table until the DPRK starts dismantling its nuclear program in a verifiable manner that would satisfy the US. The Iraq war brought good news as well as a number of bad ones; it made clear even to hawks in the Bush administration that their stakes in Korea based only on force and pressure without any attempts to negotiate would not gain any support from the world community.

The ROK, just like during the nuclear crisis of 1993-1994, was not considered a party necessary for finding a solution to the problem directly related to its vital interests. Many in Seoul were painfully offended and felt humiliated, but quickly reconciled, having declared

8 Spokesman for DPRK Foreign Ministry on Peaceful Solution to the Nuclear Issue, *KCNA*, Pyongyang, April 12, 2003.

that the main thing is not the list of participants, but positive negotiation results.

Moscow had to take a similar face-saving position. The Americans did not forgive Russia for its position concerning Iraq, and by the North Koreans for unambiguous condemnation of their nuclear ambitions.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, in a statement released on the eve of the Beijing talks, in explaining Moscow's position said that, "Russia always emphasized that we welcome any format of negotiations and any arrangement which would bring about a peaceful settlement of the problem."⁹

Some Russian analysts considered Moscow's absence in Beijing to be a result of the US policy for pushing Russia out from the process of Korean settlement. Others found the situation to be an omen of an emerging American-Chinese condominium that would rule the modern world.¹⁰

The tripartite meeting of DPRK representatives, the US and China, held on April 23-25, 2003 in Beijing, happened to be limited mainly to the statements which contained their respective well-known positions - no progress was achieved. The date of the next round is not decided, and it is not yet known whether or not it would in fact be held and who would participate.

Perhaps the most interesting outcome of the Beijing meeting one can notice is the quite opposite reaction it has received, where C. Powell described it as "useful." President Bush came to the conclusion that the DPRK had returned to its "tactics of blackmail," and in Russia, the majority of observers regarded the Beijing negotiations as a "failure."¹¹

9 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Statement for Press, "Concerning reports on possible negotiations on the Korean problem in Beijing," April 17, 2003 (<http://www.mid.ru>).

10 *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, April 23, 2003; *Novaya gazeta*, No. 28, April 21-24, 2003.

It appears that the DPRK gained the greatest benefits from the meeting. The matter of concern is that the US intelligence community seems to have failed to detect the beginning of reprocessing of fuel rods stored in Yongbyon into weapons-grade plutonium. After reassessment of available data conducted by the order of the White House, relevant officials conceded that they can neither confirm nor deny North Korean statements allegedly made during the Beijing talks, and that the reprocessing work had entered a final stage. The US was compelled to cancel the de facto “red line” drawn by them for the DPRK as the beginning of reprocessing. Earlier, Washington hinted that they may use force to stop the North Koreans from starting the process. Actually, the US, despite their public denials, had to reconcile with the DPRK’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. The new approach, though officially denied, now calls for preventing North Korea from transferring nuclear devices and materials to third party countries, especially terrorist groups.

V. Major Players’ Positions

Turning to the US’s position, unfortunately one can hardly see, any political will on the part of the Bush administration to seek a compromise with the DPRK. Bush’s hawks are unwilling to take into consideration an inherent rule. However, not only with regards to the American foreign policy, but use of force for achieving the correct purposes (in this case, non-proliferation of WMD) frequently brings about opposite results. A policy of peaceful integration has always led to positive changes in North Korea’s behavior while threats and pressure invariably led to attempts being closed and lost. The convincing proof is the DPRK’s reaction to the policies of the US’s previous and present

11 *Izvestiya*, April 25, 26, 2003; *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, April 28, 2003.

administrations.

There is every reason to believe that North Koreans would be much more compliant if the US starts to fulfill their own obligations under the bilateral agreements with Pyongyang and under the UN Charter; making practical steps toward normalization of relations, lifting unilateral sanctions, ceasing to interfere with the DPRK's admission into international financial institutions and blocking foreign aid for rebuilding the country's sagging economy. Complicated and long negotiations are not necessary to achieve these aims. The only step to take is to reaffirm the sides' adherence to the US-DPRK joint communique accepted from the results of vice-marshall Cho Myon-rok's visit to the US and his negotiations with Clinton and other members of the administration in October 2000, and to start implementing the document's provisions.

Unbiased studying of this unduly forgotten document, as well as other US-DPRK arrangements, attests that the DPRK's present security demands to the US do not exceed the framework of the promises already made by the Americans to the country. So far, the US is yet to deliver on these promises. Pyongyang is offering to re-start dialogue from the point where it was interrupted in 2000, while Washington, not wanting to comply with any of its former promises, is insisting that the DPRK, even before negotiations, had brought forth an entire package of new requirements.

The ever-growing list of US claims on the DPRK causes a deepening of doubts of whether Washington really desires to resolve the problem. The US added to their initial demand to abandon the nuclear weapons program, various items such as a ban on production and export of missiles and related technologies, reduction of conventional armed forces and arms, as well as their withdrawal from the areas adjacent to the Demilitarized Zone, terrorism, human rights and lastly, termination of drug trafficking, and as well, that the whole "package" should include inspections similar to those conducted in Iraq.

Linking such problems in one package is a sure way to lead negotia-

tions to a deadlock. Realization and verification of US conditions will take, under the most favorable circumstances, several years. But even in the event that the DPRK accepts these conditions, as lessons learned from the Iraq affair have proved, it would not guarantee that sometime in the future Washington would not declare that it was tired of waiting and begin disarmament unilaterally.

The tripartite meeting in Beijing has again confirmed that alongside the US, China's position is of key importance for settlement. During the present crisis, Beijing repeatedly spoke in favor of preservation of the denuclearized status of the Korean peninsula. A nuclear North Korea could push for the same road as Japan, South Korea, and probably the most dreadful thing for Beijing and Taiwan.¹²

At the same time for China, because of its strategic, political and prestigious considerations, liquidation of the DPRK by force, possibly as a result of US attack, would be absolutely unacceptable. Such an outcome would result in US control over the entire Korean peninsula, stationing of American armed forces directly on Chinese borders.

Beijing cannot afford to sit idly by and watch Korea be turned into the US's bridgehead for pressure on China in an already unraveling grandiose rivalry of these two most powerful economic and military powers of the world. Loss of the DPRK would seriously undermine China's prestige and international standing in Asia and all over the world. China would probably even have to reveal its plans to regain Taiwan.

US prudence demonstrated so far in Korea can be explained by the one and only circumstance that with respect to the NEA, China is a powerful factor, unlike in the Middle East. The US is likely unprepared to directly clash with China because of the North Korean nuclear problem; it would mean a conflict with one and a half billion people, and the Americans would think twice before resorting to military measures

12 *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, April 28, 2003.

in Korea.

Furthermore, China has a wide arsenal of means to maintain the DPRK as a buffer zone between itself and the US on the peninsula. Beijing, in particular, is the unique ally of North Korea's together upholding a military-political treaty.

Therefore, the US is attempting to lure the Chinese with promises that after the DPRK's "disarmament" is concluded, US forces would not be deployed in the North but returned south of the 38th parallel, or that American strikes would be limited only to North Korean nuclear facilities. Simultaneously, the Americans in every way possible are attempting to sow alienation and mistrust between China and North Korea, particularly by compliments, including one made at the top-level concerning a "constructive role" allegedly demonstrated by Beijing during the crisis.¹³

In view of the specified interests on the Korean peninsula, Beijing, apparently, is attempting henceforth to mobilize all political and diplomatic methods available as well as necessary economic resources to ensure the DPRK's survival. At the same time, China will induce North Korea in every possible way to exercise restraint in foreign policy and to go on with economic transformation which would lessen political and economic burdens for China to support the regime.

China's leadership is vitally interested in the creation of favorable external conditions for the country's further development. Therefore, Beijing has already shown that, more than ever before, it is ready to influence Pyongyang. The Chinese representative in the IAEA on February 12, 2003 had voted for the resolution to refer the North Korean nuclear problem to the UN Security Council. During the same month, China, according to some reports, blocked for "technical reasons" the only oil pipeline between the two countries for several days, thus sig-

13 "Bush Urges Multilateral Efforts on North Korea," (<http://usinfo.state.gov/2003/03/07>).

naling to Pyongyang its displeasure with the latter's behavior on the nuclear question.

In view of China's position, any military operation especially ground forces by the US and their partners against the DPRK remains highly improbable, and without it, the goals of the use of force would be unattainable.

North Korea's bravado, at times apparently reckless, in a dog-fight with the US can be explained partly by Pyongyang's understanding that China's geopolitical interests, finally, will compel it to support the DPRK.

The DPRK's position is dictated first of all by the task to ensure physical survival of the regime in the international environment that has considerably changed after the Sept. 11 attacks in the US and their easy victory in Iraq. North Koreans have read long ago a stalemate situation which exists between the US and China on the Korean peninsula, and seemingly, have decided to take their destiny in their own hands. Being incapable of deterring a probable aggressor with their out-of-date conventional armaments, they began to develop missiles and probably nuclear weapons as well.

Some aspects of the DPRK's behavior after the US attack on Iraq confirm the most pessimistic predictions made by Russian observers, who well before the war had warned about its negative influence on attempts to dissuade North Korea from development of a nuclear program.¹⁴

US policy, almost explicitly aimed at the physical elimination of S. Hussein, arrest and prosecution not only of the members of Iraq's top leaders but also middle-level nomenclature, and dissolution of the ruling party could, contrary to US expectations, push the North Korean ruling elite to a decision at any cost to obtain means which would keep a new world "Messiah" from using in Korea those technologies of

14 *The Conservative*, January 30, 2003; *Vremya- MN*, February 8, 2003.

export and American values which were applied in Iraq. Testifying to this is both the hints of the DPRK's chief delegate at the tripartite meeting in Beijing and North Korean official statements regarding the necessity to implement a "powerful physical deterrent force" and Pyongyang's determination to create such a force.¹⁵

In this context, it seems that those analysts who asserted that a decrease of Pyongyang's interest in the conclusion of the non-aggression pact with the US apparently signals its readiness for concession to Washington, in the absence of another possible motive for changes in North Korea's position. It is possible that the DPRK leadership came to the conclusion that, after the war in Iraq, written non-aggression guarantees from the US are obviously insufficient.¹⁶

At the same time, the DPRK's position remains basically dialogue-oriented, aimed at normalization of interstate relations with the US. Thus, Pyongyang hopes to gain time for fulfillment of those military programs, which by its calculations would make any risk of an attack on the DPRK unacceptable for any probable adversary, to acquire access to funds of the international financial institutions and western investments including Japanese assistance, new technologies, and foreign markets. Only under these conditions is it possible to carry out modernization of economy. Without resolving the latter task, it would be extremely difficult for the regime to support the ideological myths that justify the present political and social system in the country.

At the same time, Pyongyang understands that hasty and excessive openness of the North Korean society to the modern world is dangerous for the foundations of the system that exists in the DPRK. Therefore, the presence of sufficiently high but a controllable level of "threats from the outside" and tension on the peninsula remain important conditions for the preservation of domestic political stability. Paradoxically

15 *KCNA*, Pyongyang, May 12, 2003.

16 *Kommersant*, April 9, 2003.

enough, the fact is that both the US and DPRK are rather close on the issue, albeit for quite different reasons.

In the Republic of Korea's approaches to settlement as President Kim Dae-jung's coming to power orientation on pan-Korean interests began to gather force, the South Korean leader attempted to assist North Koreans in initiating integration into the world community by implementing the so-called "sunshine policy." However, he was met by a cold reception in Washington in March 2001. Actually, the US already at the time had tried to impose their veto on further detente between the two Koreas.¹⁷

Washington's obvious cool attitude towards the first-ever inter-Korean summit as well as towards the beginning process of normalization between the two Koreas was not left unnoticed in Seoul. The US's position provided critics with arguments to assert that US strategic interests became the main external factor preventing further movement towards detente on the Korean peninsula. Unexpected by the US in December 2002 was the presidential electing of Roh Moo-hyun, who staked on continuation of dialogue with the North, and proved to be an unambiguous reaction by the South Koreans to high-handed US aspiration, to hold them as pawns when implementing its geopolitical combinations in the region.

The newly elected Korean President declared from the beginning that he would exclude even discussion of any military option for resolving the current nuclear crisis. South Koreans started to assert that for the sake of maintaining peace they were ready to reconcile even with a nuclear DPRK. Seoul called Washington to undertake, for the purpose of reconciliation with the DPRK, the same bold steps which were made 30 years ago towards China.

However, the joint statement on the results of the Bush-Roh summit

17 See Alexander Zhebin, "Inter-Korean Relations After the Summit Meeting between the Two Koreas: A Russian View," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2002, pp. 89-92.

on May 14, 2003 in Washington concluded that both sides “will not tolerate” the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program and consider “further steps” if it continues the nuclear program, and testifies to the fact that the ROK was compelled to drift towards the US’s position on this nuclear issue. These changes aroused sharp criticism against Roh Moo-hyun, both in the South - from those who voted for him in the elections last year, and in the North, which warned Seoul about an “indescribable catastrophe” in the event that it continues to follow US policy on the nuclear issue.¹⁸

However, it would be premature to draw a final conclusion about concurrence of the US and ROK’s positions on relations with the DPRK. Seoul understands that another war on the peninsula would be a tragedy for all Koreans.

Japan has appreciably toughened its approach towards the DPRK. Positive results of Prime Minister Koizumi’s unprecedented visit to Pyongyang in September 2002 very quickly became drastically devaluated. Tokyo is attempting to include the problem of abducted Japanese nationals into the US package addressed to the DPRK. Japan has launched two satellites for tracking North Korea’s missile activity. There have been statements in Japan on the necessity to acquire capability to deliver preventive strikes against North Korea’s missile bases in the event that Pyongyang decides on a new missile test over Japanese territory.

At the same time, Japan shares the existing opinion in the region that it is necessary to maintain the denuclearized status of the Korean peninsula to induce North Korea towards market changes, and it is desirable to achieve these aims through peaceful means without allowing the North Korean nuclear problem to become an “apple of discord” in Northeast Asia. War in Korea is a great danger to Japan, considering its territory is within the range of North Korean missiles.

18 *KCNA*, Pyongyang, May 21, 2003.

The US-Japan summit in May 2003 between President Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi, where they promised not to tolerate a nuclear-armed DPRK, has finally chained Tokyo's diplomatic maneuvering in their relations with Pyongyang, and placed it back in the wake of the US policy in Korea.

In Russia, after the beginning of the current nuclear crisis in Korea, a vivid discussion was unraveled among analysts and the mass media on how Moscow should handle the situation. Some people expressed opinions in favor of the creation of a united front with the US and their allies to demonstrate "collective rigidity" towards the DPRK and to put an end to its nuclear ambitions. Opponents of such an approach pointed out that, in this case, Russia would retreat to the methods of its diplomacy in Korea during the first half of the 1990s, which resulted in Pyongyang losing its trust in Moscow and its influence on Seoul, and acquiring an ignoring attitude in the West.

There are various views on whether the DPRK already is in possession of nuclear weapons. The probability of the existence of the related program and even nuclear devices ready for testing was not excluded in a KGB report sent to the USSR Communist Party's Central Committee in 1990. Reports of the Russian Intelligence Service (SVR) published in Russian newspapers in the first half of the 1990s presented more cautious estimates on how advanced North Korea's nuclear program was, and the very opportunity of such a program was not denied.¹⁹

Some observers believe that the DPRK similar to the beginning of the 1990s is only bluffing in order to gain diplomatic concessions and economic benefits. The majority of experts agree with Russian Minister for Atomic Energy A. Rumyantsev that the DPRK lacks the industrial base necessary for production of nuclear arms.²⁰

19 *Izvestiya*, June 24, 1994; *New Challenges after Cold War: Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction*, SVR Report, Moscow, 1993, pp. 92-93; *Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Problems of Extension*, SVR Report, Moscow, 1995, p. 26.

20 *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, January 13, 2003; *Vremya novostei*, February 5, 2003.

In January of 2003, Russia drew up the fundamentals of a package settlement for the North Korean nuclear issue. It essentially consisted of a sequence of synchronized interlinked steps to be taken by the parties concerned that would result in the DPRK renouncing its nuclear program in exchange for international security and development guarantees. What is noteworthy is that Russian ideas figured in the proposals brought forward by the North Korean side at the tripartite talks in Beijing. At the same time, unfortunately, since Russia's initiatives were not put to use right away, time was lost and the situation grew complicated in many ways. Now more radical steps are needed in order to pull back from a dangerous brink. Nevertheless, the fundamental approach of the Russian side remains unchanged; Moscow is convinced that it is only the removal of concerns in a "package" on the basis of a broad compromise that makes it possible to achieve the goals formulated by the world community for itself with regard to the situation on the Korean peninsula.²¹

Russia undertook a number of active efforts to settle the problem, working both with the DPRK (visit by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation A. P. Losyokov as the special representative of President Putin to Pyongyang in January 2003) and maintaining regular contact with other interested parties.

The most natural partner by virtue of rather similar purposes in Korea was China. At the same time, as voting has proved at the IAEA on February 12, 2003 concerning referring the DPRK nuclear problem to the UN Security Council, when China supported the move Russia and Cuba refused; there is much to do before sound coordination of the two countries' policies in Korea is achieved. A number of observers regarded the Chinese action as an "unpleasant surprise" for Russia.²²

21 Official Spokesman for Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Alexander Yakovenko, Replies to Questions from Russian Media on North Korea Issues, May 28, 2003 (<http://www.mid.ru>).

22 *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, April 23, 2003.

Both sides made an attempt to mend fences during Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov's trip to Beijing in February of 2003 by publishing an unprecedented joint communique about the situation of the Korean peninsula. Moscow and Beijing, while not totally denying a multilateral approach to the problem, called first for "constructive and equal dialogue" between the US and the DPRK and stressed its "great significance" for resolving the situation around the North Korean nuclear issue, normalizing US-DPRK relations. They pledged to "make every effort to facilitate American-North Korean dialogue," thus signaling that they see both sides bearing major responsibility for seeking a proper solution. However, the document did not mention anything in regards to cooperation of the two countries on the Korean problem.²³

The final coordination of the positions of Russia and China about the Korean problem has taken place, probably as a result of new Chinese leader Hu Jintao's visit to Russia and his summit with President Putin on May 27, 2003 in the Kremlin. The two leaders signed a Joint Declaration stating, "preservation of peace and stability on the Korean peninsula meets the security interests of the two countries and the common aspirations of the international community." They also rejected as "unacceptable" the scenarios of power pressure or the use of force to resolve the problems existing there and called for the parties concerned to use political and diplomatic methods.²⁴

Russia and China set their priority ensuring a "nuclear-free status of the Korean peninsula and observance there of the regime of non-proliferation of the WMD." Simultaneously, Putin and Hu Jintao emphasized "the security of the DPRK must be guaranteed and favorable conditions must be established for its socio-economic development."

23 Joint Communiqué of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the Peoples's Republic of China on the Situation on the Korean peninsula, February 27, 2003 (<http://www.mid.ru>).

24 Joint Declaration of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, Moscow, May 27, 2003, (<http://www.mid.ru>).

Both sides promised to continue “close cooperation” in the interests of peace, stability and development on the Korean peninsula.²⁵

Moscow should not concern itself over losing its position in the DPRK for the benefit of China. It is quite natural for historical, cultural, political and geographical reasons that Beijing is playing a leading role in “sponsoring” Pyongyang. It will make the Moscow alternative for North Korean leadership even more valuable; Russia’s importance to the DPRK as a counterbalance to the Chinese influence undoubtedly will increase.

Commenting on the eve of President Bush’s visit to Saint Petersburg in May-June of 2003 on Russian and US positions concerning the North Korean nuclear issue, the official spokesman for Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs A. Yakovenko mentioned that both sides’ approaches to the nuclear problem “appear to pursue similar goals. They boil down to firmly ensuring WMD non-proliferation in that region, peaceful solutions to the existing problems, and relaxation of tensions.”

At the same time, they differ in the nature of bilateral relations of each country with the DPRK. The latter country and Russia have history of diplomatic relations dating back more than half a century and a Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation that was signed in February 2000. US-North Korean relations have thus far not been settled, which cannot help but affect Washington’s approaches to diverse developments on the Korean peninsula. Under these circumstances, Russia is prepared to play a constructive role in the settlement of US-DPRK differences naturally to the extent that Russia’s assistance is needed. In general, Russia believes that in this situation Moscow and Washington have far more room for cooperation than was the case with Iraq.²⁶

25 *Ibid.*

26 Official Spokesman for Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Alexander Yakovenko, Replies to Questions from Russian Media on North Korea Problems, May 28, 2003 (<http://www.mid.ru>).

This new approach was confirmed at the Putin-Bush summit on June 1, 2003 in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Russia's approach to the settlement of the nuclear problem is determined by the fact that the Korean peninsula directly borders on the Russian Far East region. Therefore, security of our Far East regions and their population directly depends on how events in Korea develop. In the event of a war, radioactive clouds from the Korean-style Chernobyls and streams of refugees hardly would be able to reach the US west coast, but almost certainly would enter Russian and Chinese territories.

The power option is unacceptable for Russia because it would create a direct threat to its own security. Even the low probability of WMD usage in Korea, the region directly adjoining Russia's borders, would demand putting on full alert our air defense and even nuclear deterrent forces with realization of the appropriate measures in the civil defense area at least in the Far Eastern region. China would be compelled to do the same. We and the Chinese should act in this manner because the US, in the event of preparation for military action, would in time undertake the same measures even ahead of us since the US would fear DPRK's retaliation.

It is difficult to imagine what kind of situation would arise when the three largest nuclear powers (and also their allies) stand in full readiness for a nuclear conflict, and the US concentrating a military force similar to what they had deployed against Iraq in direct proximity at our borders on the Far East. Any incident could turn out to be a catastrophe, and the fact that during the war in Iraq, American bombs and missiles were found on territories of almost all neighboring countries confirms that it is impossible to exclude such incidents during similar operations.

For this reason, Russia does not hesitate to say that they have their own interests on the peninsula, and they are not any less important than those of the states separated from Korea by seas and oceans.

VI. Possible Scenarios

The above-stated factors make it possible to outline the following possible scenarios of developments in Korea: The final settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue by diplomatic means and elimination of the danger of military conflict on the Korean peninsula. Realization of the scenario actually would complete the process of a “cross recognition” of the two Korean states (DPRK - by the US and Japan, since Russia and China have already done so concerning South Korea), of normalization of relations between the DPRK and the US, of clearing concerns related to North Korea’s possible possession of WMD and means of their delivery, of cutting down the size of conventional armed forces and armaments of both Koreas and the US in South Korea, of withdrawal of troops from the areas adjoining the DMZ, and of realization of other confidence-building measures including those of the military sphere.

These kinds of developments in the short term and intermediate term prospect are deemed improbable because of the unwillingness of certain states in due manner to take into account legitimate interests of other participants for settlement. First of all, the problem is the US’s unwillingness to provide the DPRK with security guarantees, and also to respect security interests of other states in the region.

Also, different foreign policy priorities and domestic political circumstances – escalation of the US’s demands to the DPRK, Pyongyang’s position on security guarantees and US troops withdrawal from South Korea, somewhat contradictory priorities of the US, Japan and the ROK in the process of settlement of the North Korean missile problem, and enormous complexity of tackling future verification procedures caused by the unwillingness of Pyongyang to “open” the country – make the tasks of working out and implementing a package acceptable to all participants practically impossible.

The main obstacle for realization of the “package,” even if conclud-

ed, would be almost certainly the problem of verification. Attempts to impose on Pyongyang Iraqi-style tailored inspections, most likely, may be unacceptable to North Korea because of its long-time xenophobia, lack of adequate reliability in view of the regime's leaders, security guarantees, and simply because the DPRK unlike Iraq did not lose a war. In addition, as North Koreans point out, and not without basis, the Iraq experience proved that the consent to inspections has not saved Iraq from the US attack at all.

Verification of the termination and physical liquidation of WMD programs in the DPRK is a clockwork bomb that provides any of the parties concerned, the US, and DPRK foremost with an opportunity to suspend realization of even the best possible solution.

An alternative to comprehensive settlement is the military scenario of resolving the US-DPRK conflict. Development of events in Korea under this scenario is being promoted by the Bush administration's unwillingness, and with realization of its policy in the region, to take into consideration legitimate interests of the security of other states located there including the DPRK, to abide with universal norms and principles of international law including the UN Charter (unilateral sanctions, refusal to normalize bilateral relations, unwillingness to fulfill the United States' international obligations, preference given not to methods of diplomacy, but power politics when solving the existing problems), the United States' refusal to fulfill its obligations under AF, Washington's desire to impose on Pyongyang pro-American parameters of international and domestic political behavior, and finally to replace the regime.

From the other side of the coin, it does not help to seek a compromise on the DPRK's determination to acquire at all costs such deterrent potential that would exclude unpunished intervention from the outside in its internal affairs for the purpose of liquidation of the present regime. Pyongyang believes that it is possible to achieve normalization of relations with the United States mainly because of the absence of

other “trump cards” by implicit or explicit threats to undermine nuclear and missile non-proliferation regimes.

In the short-term perspective, such an option has been deemed improbable as well. First, the US is far from sure how China and Russia would react to the use of force in Korea and what would be the long-term consequences for US relations with these two countries. An attack on the DPRK can become the most awful nightmare that can only be imagined in Washington, as well as something the Americans would like to avoid most of all - resurrection of the Russia-China alliance, even if it were vaguely similar to the alliance between the USSR and the PRC in the 1950s.

The US, in the event of conflict with the DPRK, cannot exclude probability of North Korea inflicting unacceptable damage to US allies, Japan and South Korea, which almost certainly would cause their serious objections, as well as to the US troops stationed in these countries and likely to continental parts of the US.

To this point, the primary factor determining Japan and the ROK’s interest in a military-political alliance with the US remains the belief that such a union would save them from military conflict and provide security guarantees and foster economic prosperity. Washington’s attempts to involve Japan and the ROK in military actions, in which this arena can become their territory directly threaten Japan’s and ROK’s security and the well-being achieved with such hard work, thus depriving the alliances of their coup d’etat.

In light of the above-stated factors, the most probable situation remains the development of the situation under a protracted negotiation scenario with extensive usage of traditional elements of a “carrots and sticks” policy by all parties involved with a gradual advance towards a comprehensive settlement.

With the exception of the US, all other parties concerned including the DPRK are strongly in favor of political and diplomatic methods to be employed for resolving the problem.

Thus, an initial format of dialogue has no essential value because of two major reasons: First, it is clear to all that the agreement can be achieved only after the DPRK and the US is able to establish a certain level of mutual understanding. Second, the fate of the present and already almost forgotten “four-party talks” on the Korean question (US, China, DPRK, ROK) has shown that as soon as an opportunity for progress on bilateral tracks opens the dialogue members easily forget multilateral mechanisms.

While continuing their rigid rhetoric, North Koreans are in every possible way signaling to Washington about their readiness to restart dialogue. The DPRK’s promises to remove all Washington’s concerns about its military programs and to accept American inspections demonstrate how far North Korea is ready to go to alleviate US concerns. This would certainly be the case, if the US takes appropriate reciprocal steps, which would take into account the DPRK’s security concerns.

On the US’s side, the matter is complicated by a number of factors: The Bush administration is deeply divided over how to handle the nuclear problem. It is possible that in the near future the situation will not improve. Even more fundamental is the problem of what the US really wants - preservation of the denuclearized status of the Korean peninsula or regime change?

Also, US foreign policy including the field of nuclear non-proliferation still is beset by an “arrogance of power “ and “double standards.” Americans believe that under any circumstances they are free to act at their disposal, but all others are obliged to “play by the rules” - the rules that the US recently has had a tendency to change for each particular case. The US Senate decision in May 2003 on renewal of development of low-yield nuclear arms primarily intended the destruction of underground targets (where in the DPRK most military facilities are located there) which would hardly promote confidence on both sides, not to mention persuasiveness of US arguments in favor of preserva-

tion of nuclear non-proliferation in Korea and in other parts of the globe.²⁷

It seems that under these circumstances it would be almost impossible to achieve sound progress without a clear signal from the US to North Koreans about its intention to work for a peaceful solution to the nuclear issue. Among such unambiguous signals that do not require congressional consent, one example could be the removal of the DPRK from the list of states-sponsored of international terrorism. It would be much easier to do so since the State Department for several years already could not find any proof of such activity. This step could open channels to the West and may first provide Japanese aid and loans from the international financial organizations to the DPRK. The step would not cost the US a cent, and it is rather important for the administration for its relations with Congress. At the same time, such a move would provide a strong impetus for progress in all other directions.

Unfortunately, before agreeing to any substantial negotiations, the Bush administration seems inclined to use all coercive methods available for putting maximum pressure on the DPRK. The new policy is likely to be isolation and containment with employment of such highly provocative elements like keeping Pyongyang leaders under threat of instant strike and inspections of North Korean ships in the high seas. Its success would depend on to a great extent on the US's ability to organize a new "coalition of the willing" and cooperation with China and Russia.

Incidentally, under the circumstances, Russia and China expect the ROK to play a more active role in search of a peaceful solution. Both countries consider necessary the continuation of active dialogue and further development of cooperation between North and South Korea. Moscow and Beijing hailed the process for its "substantial contribution to improving the situation on the Korean peninsula and Northeast

27 *AFP*, Washington, May 22, 2003.

Asia as a whole.”²⁸

Even under the long-term negotiation scenario, it is impossible to exclude occurrences of some instances of animosity and possibly even mini-crises in the relations between the DPRK on the one side, and the US, Japan and South Korea on the other. However, such outbursts of tension would most likely arise not as harbingers of the “big” conflict but as a signal of the necessity for parties to make new mutual concessions.

In any case, one can hardly expect an early and smooth settlement of the present crisis. All parties should understand that a solution to a much more fundamental problem should be sought simultaneously - how to prevent recurrence of such situations in Korea and elsewhere in the world.

28 Joint Communiqué of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the Situation on the Korean Peninsula, February 27, 2003 (<http://www.mid.ru>).