

**Dealing with North Korea:
The Key Foreign Policy and Security Challenge
for the
U.S.-ROK Alliance**

Alan D. Romberg
Senior Associate
The Henry L. Stimson Center

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Introduction

Despite ROK President Roh Moo-hyun's successful visit to the United States, and the very artful joint statement issued following his meeting with U.S. President George W. Bush on May 14, the alliance partners have so far only papered over their fundamental differences on how to approach North Korea and what steps to take if the situation deteriorates. Not only is there a wide gap on the issue of how—or even whether—to negotiate with Pyongyang beyond the most general commitment to resolve the issue “peacefully,” but in important respects the goals of the two governments diverge sharply.

In this circumstance, it will be a major challenge to both manage the North Korean problem and to maintain—and hopefully strengthen—the U.S.-ROK alliance. It is clear that both Mr. Roh and Mr. Bush value the alliance and that they have established a certain level of personal rapport that will help navigate the difficult course ahead. But unless the North Korean nuclear issue can be resolved through diplomacy—and as of this writing that is at least questionable—there is a significant probability that heightened tensions with North Korea will strain ties between Washington and Seoul.

This paper addresses some of the key issues involved and the challenges ahead.

The North Korean Issue

Although the Roh Moo-hyun government is committed to the complete elimination of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program, the priority goal of South Korean policy toward the North remains to preserve peace and stability on the Peninsula. Following the lead established by President Kim Dae Jung of seeking to draw the North into a more normal and stable relationship through engagement rather than relying primarily on pressure tactics, President Roh has made clear that, while he will seek responsible behavior by the DPRK, he will not insist on tit-for-tat reciprocity. Mr. Roh appears to have adjusted his position to some extent, apparently recognizing that the solution to North Korea's provocative behavior lies not only in showing it a way out but also in pushing back against egregious North Korean behavior. Thus, for example, in the recent economic talks, the South Korean delegation would not proceed with the talks until the North provided an “explanation” for Pyongyang's comment about “disastrous” consequences for Seoul if it cooperated with the United States. While some South Koreans, especially in the media, have criticized the Roh Administration for accepting a weak DPRK statement of “explanation,” the fact that the North complied with the requirement to provide a non-threatening statement is noteworthy.

Moreover, having taken a position during the election campaign that suggested he would lead the ROK in a policy of distancing itself from the U.S. approach to the North and that he would insist that the United States cede to Seoul the lead in North Korea policy, as well as in aspects of alliance relations, President Roh has moved toward an approach characterized more by cooperation and consultation with Washington rather than

assertion. This change has elicited some challenges within South Korea from Mr. Roh's traditional political supporters, but overall it has not only won Seoul a greater measure of influence with the United States as a responsible partner but it has also met with the approval of large numbers of South Koreans.

That being said, South Korea remains committed to a peaceful resolution of the North Korean problem, and while President Bush also currently adheres to such an approach, there is a reasonable probability that the situation will continue to escalate and that Washington will eventually employ coercive diplomacy. In this connection, President Bush's announcement of a Proliferation Security Initiative on May 31 is instructive. Mr. Bush spoke of working with a number of close allies on new agreements "to search planes and ships carrying suspect cargo and to seize illegal weapons or missile technologies." He went on: "Over time, we will extend this partnership as broadly as possible to keep the world's most destructive weapons away from our shores and out of the hands of our common enemies."¹ How Seoul would react if such an approach were applied to the DPRK would depend on many things, but it is distinctly possible that the United States will eventually adopt a more robust posture than South Korea will find comfortable.

For the moment, despite Pyongyang's (now repeated) claim that it already has nuclear weapons that cannot be dismantled and its assertion that it has almost finished reprocessing the 8,000+ spent fuel rods previously stored under international inspection, the North Korean nuclear situation is relatively stable. Both sides (i.e., North Korea and everyone else) are currently avoiding actions that could trigger immediate escalation and confrontation. The North says it is awaiting a U.S. response to its "bold proposal" made at the April 23-25 Beijing talks, while the U.S., China, South Korea, Japan and Russia consult about next steps. China, especially, is working hard to convene another round of trilateral talks. Beijing would be amenable to a larger grouping but sees little prospect that North Korea will accept it in the immediate future and, like South Korea, Japan and Russia, places more importance on getting the United States and DPRK to sit down together than on the shape and size of the table.

The U.S. may well be persuaded to return to trilateral talks even though it insists that ultimately all of the other players must be involved. But a senior U.S. official has said Washington will not engage in substantive negotiations without the others at the table.² As the United States views it, even a direct "exchange of statements" can only take place in a multilateral setting, not in a "pull-aside" or side-room meeting.³ North Korea, in the

¹ "Remarks by the President to the People of Poland," Wawel Royal Castle, Krakow, Poland, May 31, 2003 (available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030531-3.html>).

² See "U.S. to Hold Talks with N. Korea, if Japan, S. Korea Join," (Jiji Press: Crawford, Texas, May 23, 2003).

³ A senior administration official, briefing the press "on background" following the June 1, 2003, Evian meeting between President Bush and PRC President Hu Jintao, preceded the rejection of a bilateral meeting by saying that Mr. Bush had reiterated that "we have to have multilateral talks if this is to move forward. Within those multilateral talks, if the North Koreans look us in the eye on one corner of the table and say things directly to us, we're going to listen, obviously, and we will do the same thing back to them." (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/06/20030601-4.html>).

meantime, will need to find a way to reverse its April position, where it refused to meet with the United States except bilaterally after the first day of the Beijing talks.⁴

All of the non-DPRK parties, including South Korea, share the U.S. goal of eliminating the North's nuclear weapons program completely, verifiably and irreversibly. Whether they can eventually agree on what it takes to achieve such a goal is, as already suggested, open to question. But the basic goal is shared. However, no other government shares the U.S. position that the North must first unilaterally eliminate its HEU program and refreeze its plutonium program before even talking with Pyongyang about how the North's security, political and economic requirements might be met. They may accept that those are the first steps that must be taken within an overall agreement. But the others all believe that without some positive incentive to commit to—and act on—dismantling the nuclear program, Pyongyang can be expected to refuse to take such steps.

Although President Bush's position is apparently firm, his advisors are split. Some believe that the United States should at least lay out for Pyongyang what reciprocal steps would be taken once the North moved to deal with its HEU and unfrozen plutonium programs. Others disagree, but even they are not all of one mind. Some are willing to strike a deal, but they believe it would be unacceptable to discuss future reciprocal steps until the North has restored the *status quo ante* by dismantling the HEU program and refreezing the plutonium program; otherwise we would be rewarding bad behavior and yielding to blackmail. Others go further, believing that the North can never be trusted and that, while an attack on known nuclear facilities would be unwise for a variety of reasons,⁵ applying pressure to the North could yield DPRK capitulation and agreement to dismantle the programs and, even if not, could hasten the collapse of the current regime in Pyongyang.

Whether North Korea has already stepped over some unstated “red lines” has not been formally determined, or at least not announced. But presumably confirmation that the North has indeed—as claimed—already reprocessed most or all of the spent fuel rods previously in storage, a DPRK nuclear test, a formal declaration by North Korea that it is a nuclear weapons state, or even a launch of a long-range missile could trigger further

⁴ Apparently relying on earlier, vague U.S. statements about not ruling out bilateral discussions at some point, Beijing persuaded Pyongyang to come to the initial session on the grounds that it would be able to meet directly—and alone—with the United States. However, in the meantime, the U.S. position against bilateral talks had hardened, and Beijing either did not pick up on or ignored the shift.

⁵ A number of outside analysts, and reportedly some within the Administration, favor an attack on Yongbyon on the grounds that, once the DPRK has more fissile material, it will be impossible to prevent its transfer to terrorists and other miscreant nations. So far, that position is not being seriously contemplated. At the moment, a “bolt out of the blue” attack on the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon would be rejected not merely because it would constitute a breach of faith with major allies in Seoul and Tokyo—and greatly upset China—but because it would create enormous danger for tens of thousands of American civilians in South Korea and Japan if the North were to retaliate. This would remain the case even if the 2nd Infantry Division were suddenly moved south of the Han River. In that regard, one might note that the handling of the force redeployment issue by both Washington and Seoul has been less than ideal, but with the May 14 Joint Statement between the two leaders, and with the consultative process now under way between officials, there is at least a prospect that it can be dealt with in ways that maintain mutual confidence.

steps. At a minimum, the United States and others are likely to seek a statement by the UN Security Council president condemning the North's action and calling for Pyongyang to reverse course. Depending on the nature of the offending North Korean action, the Security Council might also authorize economic sanctions, even if, due to opposition of China and Russia, it did not seek to impose uniform sanctions by Council mandate. Even now, selective tightening up of trade and financial transfers to North Korea, as well as stepped-up enforcement of police action against counterfeit currency and narcotics shipments, are likely to be adopted.

If still harsher action were taken in response to any of the provocative North Korean steps suggested above, consistent with President Bush's statement in Poland, the United States would also likely seek to block the export of long-range missiles and fissile material. This would carry with it considerably higher risks of a North Korean reaction, and it would raise tensions, thus causing possible fissures between the United States and others. But from Washington's perspective, the risks that such enforcement action might create in the region would need to be balanced against the risks created by not taking action. That is, the President and his senior advisors would need to consider the possibility that nuclear materials and their means of delivery could fall into the hands of those who would seek to use them with devastating effect directly against the United States. Put differently, what has hitherto been handled as an international security issue would be transformed into a U.S. homeland security threat. In the post-9/11 world, this would appear as a clear and present danger to Americans warranting severe countermeasures.

Looking for Solutions

A key issue in devising a strategy to avoid having to confront such dangerous choices lies in one's assessment of North Korea's ultimate goal for its nuclear weapons program. If the North intends, whatever happens, to maintain some level of nuclear capability as a deterrent against the United States and its allies, and if no negotiated solution could lead to complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of the program, then we may have to face the kind of confrontational scenario laid out above for the reasons stated. If, on the other hand, despite what it has said to Assistant Secretary Kelly and others about having nuclear weapons that cannot be dismantled, the North is willing to bargain away the program for solid security assurances and the economic and political relationships it has outlined, that is quite a different matter.

The policy problem is that we will never know which it is if we do not test the North by engaging in serious negotiations. At the end of the day, multilateral negotiations are not only desirable but necessary for all concerned. This is true, in part, because the U.S. does not trust the North to live up to bilateral agreements. But it is also true because the North does not trust the United States. Multilateral arrangements can thus provide each side with credible assurances that the other will fulfill its commitments.

At the present stage, however, the essential conversation must take place between the United States and North Korea. The U.S. insists the North act to dismantle the HEU program and refreeze the plutonium program first before addressing the DPRK's

concerns; the North insists the U.S. act first, making a “bold reversal” of its hostile policy before it will talk about the nuclear issue. Neither position is sustainable if there is to be a diplomatic resolution of the issue, as both assert they want. Some in the North no doubt count on international pressures on the U.S. to modify Washington’s current adamant stance, just as many in the U.S. count on China and others to press the North to change its course. Some people, of course, count on the impact of economic pressure on the now-weakened North to force the latter change by bringing into play the regime’s survival instinct.

Each side is taking a major gamble that seems more likely to backfire than to pay off. What both need to do, instead, is to adopt a truly “bold approach”—beyond what either is currently considering—and to talk seriously about each other’s vital concerns.

There is, of course, no “moral equivalence” between the North’s violation of its commitments in the form of a clandestine nuclear weapons program, on the one hand, and the U.S. insistence on prior DPRK dismantlement of that program, on the other. But the problem here is not moral equivalence or moral clarity; it is getting from the dangerous situation we are in to a safer place. The cost to North Korea of failure to adopt a pragmatic approach would certainly be greater hardship for its people and perhaps, after an indeterminate period of time, the collapse of that system. In the meantime, however, the cost to the United States of a failure to adopt a pragmatic approach could be to force a dangerous choice between a nuclear-armed North Korea and a military confrontation, perhaps even war. History would not forgive that failure.