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Time of Reckoning: The North Korean Bomb, the United States, and the Future of the Korean Peninsula

By Alexandre Y. Mansourov

Despite Chinese intermediation and South Korean flexibility and generosity in the past three years, prospects for security settlement on the Korean peninsula and normalization of relations between Pyongyang and Washington and Tokyo seem to be farther than ever. The six-party talks are stalled, and early implementation of the principles embodied in the 19 September 2005 Joint Statement on Denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is put in doubt. North Korea continues to publicly build up its semi-opaque nuclear arsenal. In turn, the United States insists that "all options are on the table" and keeps on "kicking the can down the road" in terms of its policy of "regime change," while intensifying its efforts through "proliferation security initiative," in various multilateral fora, and via other venues to form an "anti-DPRK coalition" aimed at restraining, if not rolling back, the North Korean arduous march to the nuclear superdome.

The Bush and Koizumi administrations believe that the DPRK is a "criminal state" ("a rogue state," "punk state," "psycho state," "evil state," "stalker state," or a "state of concern," depending on one's sensibilities) undergoing internal implosion, that poses a world-wide existential threat because of its willingness to exploit the seams of lawlessness and international terrorism, its involvement in international trafficking of drugs and humans, counterfeiting of foreign currency, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction abroad, and gross violations of human rights at home.

In the same vein, Pyongyang considers the United States an "evil empire pursuing a unilateralist policy of aggression and hegemonism in order to spread American-style 'democracy' worldwide by the force of arms to build a U.S.-led order for world domination."(1) In the minds of North Korean officials, the U.S. presents a "clear and present danger" to the survival of their regime because "the U.S. military occupation of the south is aimed at strangulating socialism and bringing down our system in the north."

Obviously, there is zero mutual trust between Pyongyang and Washington, and there exists an acute security dilemma between these belligerents, as well as a bad history of broken promises and discarded security commitments. Short of regime change in either capital, it is hardly possible that Pyongyang and Washington might reach any kind of substantive and durable security settlement any time soon.

Current U.S. Policy Towards the DPRK

Current U.S. policy towards the DPRK is based on three pillars – the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), the Illicit Activities Initiative (IAI), and the Human Rights Initiative (HRI). These policy initiatives are the products of the high-level inter-agency policy-making coordination processes concerning the North Korean problem, which have occurred since 2002 under close supervision by the Office of the Vice-President and National Security Council. They were proposed by the relevant inter-departmental policy coordination committees, reviewed by the deputies committee, vetted by the principals committee, and approved by the President of the United States. The Department of State North Korea Working Group was responsible for facilitating their timely implementation and evaluation of the effects achieved.

First, the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) is aimed at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and denuclearization of the peninsula through the mechanism of the six-party talks. It is also designed to interdict the WMD/E-related proliferation through a multitude of coercive efforts, including such multinational exercises as Pacific Protector, Sanso, Sea Saber, Clever Sentinel, and Team Samurai. The PSI also involves contingency planning in the event if the DPRK goes nuclear.

President Bush authorized the PSI in his National Security Presidential Directive 20 in May 2003. The National Strategy to Combat WMD Proliferation (NSCWMD) further elaborated the fundamental objectives, ends, and means of PSI. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a CJCS Instruction 3520.01 to provide guidance for the U.S. armed forces on PSI participation. The PACOM Security Cooperation Guidance (SCG) dated November 2005 laid out further directives regarding the implementation of the PSI-related activities in the areas of prevention, interdiction, and contingency planning. Following the passage of the UNSC resolution 1695 on July 15, 2006, in response to DPRK missile tests of July 4-5, the United States adopted a "broad interpretation" of the missile and WMD-related sanctions on North Korea, essentially outlawing all financial and most of the economic transactions with the DPRK because of the potential for their proceeds being diverted for the prohibited uses.

Taepodong Missile

Second, the Illicit Activities Initiative (IAI) is designed to halt the flow of illicit resources to the North Korean regime, which should undermine its long-term survivability, by combating the North Korean counterfeiting of the U.S. currency, trafficking in narcotics, and smuggling of contraband goods. The IAI is underpinned by the administrative and criminal findings and rulings issued by the U.S. Department of Justice, Department of the Treasury, Commerce Department, and other U.S. government agencies. Some of the publicly known examples of the IAI in action include the Operation "Smoking Dragon," Operation "Royal Charm," the case of the drug-running vessel "Ponsu," and the money-laundering case at the Banco Delta Asia.

Third, the Human Rights Initiative (HRI) is envisioned to enable the promotion of democratic ideals and human rights in the short term, which is projected to lead to political liberalization, development of civil society, and regime transformation in the DPRK in the long run. The HRI was launched in October 2004 when the U.S. Congress passed the North Korea Human Rights Act. The Advance Democracy Act of 2005 added further momentum. In order to implement the HRI, President Bush appointed Jay Lefkowitz as his Personal Envoy for North Korean Human Rights with an office at the Department of State under the Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs.

As part of the HRI, the U.S. government seeks to promote the freedom of information via stepped up anti-regime radio broadcasting into the DPRK with the assistance from the Voice of America and Radio Free Asia stations. The Department of State provides funding for the National Endowment for Democracy and North Korea Freedom Coalition to promote democratic values and principles among the North Korean population. The US Agency for International Development links its humanitarian aid to Pyongyang to the requirements of transparency, accountability, and greater access, currently unmet by the DPRK government. The U.S. Congress, supported by a wide-ranging coalition of high-profile interest groups and NGOs, including the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, etc., relentlessly presses the administration to condemn human rights abuses in the North Korean gulag, to provide political asylum to North Korean defectors, and strongly defend North Korean refugees' rights in the third countries.

In sum, the neoconservative consensus within the Bush administration appears to maintain that the North Korean economy is in shambles, and Kim Jong Il's totalitarian rule is doomed. The country is in protracted decay, and it is just a matter of time before it collapses. The current U.S. hard-line policy is designed to expedite system disintegration in the North through intensifying pressure on all fronts – diplomatic, economic, financial, informational, military, law enforcement, etc., by rolling out escalating international sanctions regimes, in order to restrict the flow of resources from the international community that may support the current regime, and by minimizing the potential negative consequences of the regime's lashing out in a final act of desperation in close cooperation with U.S. allies and partners in the region. It is unrealistic to expect that the neoconservative consensus shared by most officials from the U.S. national security establishment can be softened or moved closer towards the constructive engagement position, regardless of what the DPRK government does, short of unconditional surrender, unilateral nuclear disarmament, following the CVID model, and self-imposed regime abdication. It is wishful thinking to expect that the current path of confrontation may meander somehow into a mutually acceptable path of peaceful coexistence any time soon.

The "October Surprise" and Possible U.S. Response to the North Korean Nuclear Test

On October 3, 2006, the DPRK Foreign Ministry announced that "the DPRK will in the future conduct a nuclear test under the condition where safety is firmly guaranteed."(2) For quite some time, experts assumed that the question was not if it does it, but when, and expected the nuclear test to take place much sooner rather than later. North Korea detonated its first nuclear device at last on October 9, 2006. It remains to be seen whether another, more powerful, nuclear test will follow shortly. International repercussions of the North Korean nuclear breakout will be grave.

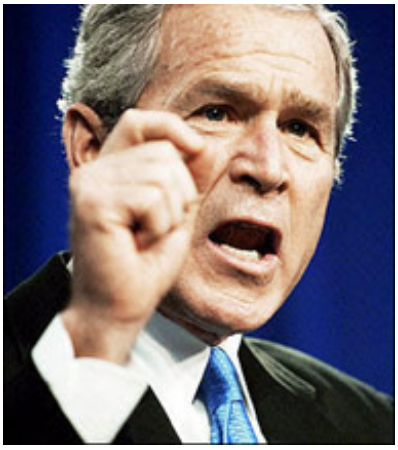
In a politically-charged atmosphere of the upcoming mid-term congressional elections, on October 4, 2006, Christopher R. Hill, the assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, reiterated the long-standing U.S. official position in a speech at the newly created US-Korea Institute at John Hopkins University "We are not going to live with a nuclear North Korea, we are not going to accept it."(3) The United States made clear that it would not let Pyongyang's nuclear challenge undermine American nuclear hegemony, put in doubt the U.S. nuclear guarantees to the allied states against nuclear threats from nuclear powers, mock Washington's promise to halt the spread of nuclear weapons to local enemies, further damage the nuclear nonproliferation regime, and weaken U.S. leadership in Northeast Asia. But, on October 9, 2006, the DPRK called the U.S. bluff.(4)

North Korean
Leader Kim Jong Il

After the nuclear explosion went off in North Korea, Washington's policy approach towards Pyongyang did not change in any fundamental way. Tough rhetoric became even tougher. A long list of harsh unilateral sanctions will become even longer and harsher. Together with Japan, the United States is sure to push for a very stern Chapter VII resolution by the UN Security Council, condemning the nuclear test, demanding that the DPRK cease and desist all nuclear weapon development activities, imposing a new comprehensive layer of international sanctions, and, possibly, threatening the use of "all means available" to remove the "threat to international peace and security" posed by the DPRK's expanded nuclear programs.

China and Russia may seek to shape the consensus-building process within the United Nations Security Council by offering their own draft resolution with milder language. In the end, although China and Russia may decide to condemn the DPRK for its nuclear proliferation activities and the spark that its action could provide for igniting a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia, they are likely to impose only limited, mostly symbolic, sanctions on their North Korean neighbor.

Despite many predictions of a possible Chinese U-turn in its policy towards the DPRK, Beijing's reaction to the North Korean nuclear test is unlikely to exceed its reaction to the Pakistani nuclear tests back in May-June 1998. After all, today the DPRK is a much closer ally of the PRC than Pakistan was at that time. Even after arming itself with nuclear weapons ostensibly against the Chinese will, the North continues to play an important role in the PRC's strategic calculations in Northeast Asia, deflecting American military pressure from the Taiwan Straits and blocking the peninsular gateway to the Chinese industrial Northeast. Besides, Chinese officials are well aware that if they push Pyongyang too hard, the Dear Leader may do exactly the opposite to show his independence and maintain his nationalist credentials.


George Bush condemning North Korean nuclear test

Against the backdrop of the worsening military security situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, and continued nuclear tensions with Iran, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said on October 3, 2006: "North Korea is an active proliferator (of WMD). And were they to test and were they then to proliferate those technologies, we would be living with a proliferator and obviously we would be living in a somewhat different world."(5)

The nuclear test may put the future of nuclear diplomacy on the Korean peninsula in doubt. A senior Bush administration official commented that, "North Korea's nuclear test would make the six-party talks worthless." China's role as an honest broker and fair mediator in the resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis may prove to be ineffective and futile. Many U.S. conservatives admonish that after refusing to negotiate seriously with non-nuclear North Korea, Washington cannot succumb to nuclear blackmail after the test and start negotiating with a nuclear gun put to its head: it will send a very bad message around the world. In contrast, some pragmatic officials argue that the United States did negotiate successful nuclear arms control and disarmament deals with other nuclear powers – current and former: there is nothing wrong with negotiating with the enemy as long as U.S. national interests are advanced. The U.S. cannot outsource the protection of its vital national interests to other countries or multilateral fora; it must enter into serious bilateral negotiations with the DPRK to find a meaningful and lasting solution to the North Korean nuclear problem without delay.

With regard to the military security posture in Northeast Asia, as former senior Department of State official Richard Armitage has indicated recently, Washington may attempt to tighten its military alliance relationships with both Japan and South Korea, possibly slowing down, or even reversing outright, the ongoing strategic readjustments within both alliances, including transfer of wartime operational control reform, troop reduction and redeployment in Korea, as well as the relocation of U.S. Marines from Okinawa to Guam. The U.S. plans to stand up TMD and NMD systems will be accelerated. The U.S. military may be asked to move more combat-ready assets to the theater, including a deployment of strategic bombers in Guam and possible re-introduction of tactical nuclear weapons on the peninsula. These policy changes will be necessitated not only by the strategic imperative of nuclear deterrence of the growing North Korean WMD threat, but also by the U.S. desire to prevent further nuclear proliferation in the region by keeping a tight lid on the re-awakened nuclear aspirations of Tokyo, Seoul, and Taiwan.

The U.S. may press its allies, partners, and all friendly nations, especially the EU countries and Australia, to recall their ambassadors from Pyongyang for consultations, suspend all humanitarian and developmental aid to Kim Jong Il's regime, put in place a general trade embargo, and even, possibly, impose an air and sea blockade of North Korea. Washington will press Seoul to radically overhaul its policy of peace and prosperity and terminate its bilateral assistance, investment, and trade with Pyongyang, including ROK participation in the Mt. Kumgang tourism development project and in the development of the Kaesong Industrial Zone.

The North Korean nuclear test may further undermine the global nuclear non-proliferation regime by encouraging the other nuclear wannabes – both rogue states and non-state terrorist groups - to intensify their own search for nuclear weapons and opening the door for the resumption of nuclear testing by the existing nuclear powers. Iran is sure to attempt to benefit from the new found North Korean nuclear prowess, while following very closely the U.S. response to the DPRK nuclear challenge. Thus, Washington is under pressure to respond sternly in order not to send the wrong signal to Teheran, which has the domestic resources to create a much bigger nuclear headache for the U.S. in the Middle East than North Korea in Northeast Asia. On October 9, 2006, President Bush warned Pyongyang, "The transfer of nuclear weapons or material by North Korea to states or non-state entities would be considered a grave threat to the United States, and we would hold North Korea fully accountable for the consequences of such action."(6) This time, the Bush administration is not bluffing. This is clearly a red line vital to the U.S. national security, which can be crossed only at Kim Jong Il's peril.

Conclusion

Could an escalation in nuclear confrontation have been averted? On October 7, 2006, in an exercise of multilateral preventive diplomacy, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a Japanese-drafted non-binding presidential statement, urging North Korea to discontinue its planned nuclear test, and return to the six-party talks and cautioning the communist nation that a nuclear test would threaten world security.(7) This last warning fell on deaf ears in Pyongyang.

On October 8, 2006, CNN, citing a former ROK MDP lawmaker Jang Sung-min who referred to his conversation with a senior Chinese diplomat, reported that North Korea allegedly informed China it might drop its plan to test its first atomic bomb if Washington held direct bilateral talks with Pyongyang. However, if the U.S. were to ignore this final offer and move toward imposing new sanctions or launching a military attack, the DPRK would accelerate its preparations for a nuclear test.(8) This may have been a product of wishful thinking on the part of some South Korean and, perhaps, Chinese circles eager to find a way to de-escalate the current crisis. Or, it may have been a genuine trial balloon floated by Pyongyang in a last-minute attempt to get a reputable senior American official, someone with stature of the former US President Carter or Bush, to come to North Korea and negotiate the eleventh hour nuclear deal with Kim Jong Il, reminiscent of the June 1994 Kim Il Sung-Carter breakthrough. For ideological, diplomatic, personal, and domestic political reasons, this last-ditch offer fell on deaf ears in Washington.

At 10:36 am, on October 9, 2006, the DPRK conducted an underground nuclear test(9) at a facility in Hwadaeri (under a mountain at an estimated depth of 360 meters) near Kilju city, North Hamgyong Province (385 km northeast off Pyongyang and 130 km off the DPRK-Russian border), causing a 4.2-magnitude earthquake (US Geological Service estimate) and producing a yield equivalent ranging from 550 tons of TNT (ROK-US estimate) to 5-15 kilotons (Russian estimate).(10) Whether it was a real "pop" or just a "fizz" is now a matter of technical assessment and political spins. Obviously, the test has proved that the North Korean scientists successfully mastered the nuclear weapon design and manufacturing technology. It also took the wind out of the speculation that the DPRK may have had a very

small stockpile of separated plutonium sufficient only for 1-2 nuclear weapons. Now, one can be more confident that they have enough separated plutonium to produce more weapons, perhaps 6-13, and can afford conducting another nuclear test in the future. It also confirms that Pyongyang has chosen the plutonium route to the atomic bomb, contrary to the serious concerns of the international community about the alleged DPRK clandestine HEU program, which led to the termination of the 1994 Agreed Framework. Only history will tell whether the U.S. abandonment of the Agreed Framework in 2002 was a strategic blunder on the part of the Bush administration, which finally let the North Korean nuclear genie out of the bottle, thereby undermining the national security of the United States, its allies, and friends in the region.

Now, the world indeed has become somewhat different: North Korea has arrived as the eighth official nuclear weapon state. But, it also remains somewhat the same. The US-DPRK tensions will continue to escalate. The game of chicken between Washington and Pyongyang will race on with little bilateral communication.(11) The regional nuclear arms race will possibly intensify. The day after the nuclear test, we are all somewhat less secure, worse off, and closer to the second Korean War. This notwithstanding, the international community can attempt to turn this crisis into a unique opportunity to resolve the Korean question writ large once and for all through a multinational peace-making effort aimed at extending the benefits of a secure and prosperous life in a free and open society to all Koreans living on a united peninsula, while establishing the foundations for a genuine regional multilateral security architecture capable of coping with the most difficult security challenges in Northeast Asia in a cooperative, effective, and mutually acceptable manner.

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Notes

(1) See "US Anti-Terrorist War Flayed," KCNA, Pyongyang, April 7, 2005.
(2) "DPRK Foreign Ministry Clarifies Stand on New Measure to Bolster War Deterrent," KCNA, Pyongyang, October 3, 2006.
(3) David E. Sanger and Jim Yardley, "US Warns North Koreans About Nuclear Test," The New York Times, October 5, 2006.
(4) Tony Karon, "North Korea Calls the U.S. Bluff," Time Magazine online edition, October 9, 2006.
(5) "North Korean Nuclear Test Imminent?" The Dong-A Ilbo, Seoul, October 5, 2006.
(6) "Bush: North Korea defies international community," CNN online edition, October 9, 2006.
(7) "Security Council formally urges N. Korea to scrap nuclear test plans," Yonhap News Agency, Seoul, October 7, 2006.
(8) "Source: N. Korea may drop test if U.S. holds talks," CNN online edition, October 8, 2006
(9) According to the KCNA announcement on October 9, 2006, "The field of scientific research in the DPRK successfully conducted an underground nuclear test under secure conditions on October 9, 2006, at a stirring time when all the people of the country are making a great leap forward in the building of a great, prosperous, powerful socialist nation. It has been confirmed that there was no such danger as radioactive emission in the course of the nuclear test as it was carried out under scientific consideration and careful calculation. The nuclear test was conducted with indigenous wisdom and technology 100 percent. It marks a historic event as it greatly encouraged and pleased the KPA and people that have wished to have powerful self-reliant defense capability." See KCNA, Pyongyang, October 9, 2006.
(10) "N. Korea tests nuclear weapon at Hwadaeri near Kilju: Defense Ministry," The Yonhap News Agency, October 9, 2006.
(11) Reportedly, Pyongyang decided to shut down the so-called New York channel by recalling its deputy head of the U.N Mission, Han Song-ryol, who was in charge of the DRPK-US contacts, from New York without sending any replacement.

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