

North Korea and Nuclear Proliferation: A Promising Spur?

Professor Han Sung-Joo

Chairman, Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Seoul)

On the proliferation front, we are getting optimistic news relating to North Korea and pessimistic news regarding Iran. Presumably, the North Korean nuclear negotiation is making progress, with the prospect that the forthcoming Six-Party talks will seal a deal that will stop the North Korean nuclear weapons program. On the other hand, the Iranian situation seems to be getting worse with the IAEA reporting that Iran, defying the U.N. Security Council, has been working on uranium enrichment.

Thus, despite the fact that North Korea is far more advanced than Iran with its nuclear weapons program, what with its presumed (and self-proclaimed) possession of nuclear bombs and plutonium, bomb test, and possibly uranium enrichment program, there is a greater complacency with the North Korean than with the Iranian problem.

Why is this the case? The answer is that the Bush administration, after initially renouncing the Clinton Administration's handling of the North Korean nuclear issue as reflected in the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework, finally came around to actually embracing and even emulating it, except for the light water reactors, that is.

North Korea, on its part, decided to dole out partial concessions that the Bush Administration could construe as a significant progress. The North Koreans are even providing visuals to magnify the impact. In early May, television viewers were presented with the picture of U.S. State Department officials crossing the border at Panmunjom with 7 book boxes presumably containing 18,000 pages of documents and records provided by Pyongyang on its nuclear program. The viewers will be treated with another picture spectacular of North Korea's cooling tower being exploded live on television screen. Never mind North Korea probably doesn't have much need for the outworn facility. It will give ammunition to the promoters of the North Korea deal as a proof of Pyongyang's sincerity to denuclearize itself.

Even the photos released by the United States in April, purportedly showing North Korean complicity in the Syrian nuclear program, are not affecting adversely the U.S.-North Korea deal or the Six Party Talks. The IAEA complains that the Israeli bombing of the Syrian nuclear reactor in September last year all but erased not only the al-Kibar nuclear reactor but also any evidence of where it came from. As long as President Bush regards the disposition of the plutonium program, nuclear weapons and material (i.e., plutonium) the most important parts of the negotiation, even leaving the uranium enrichment program and Syrian connection ambiguous, the U.S. and North Korea will proceed with the negotiation with the blessing of China, South Korea, and Russia.

The inevitable question is whether all these seeming signs of progress will ultimately lead to a complete denuclearization of North Korea and, if so, when. North Korea must have felt vindicated when its bomb testing in October 2006 prompted the United States to change its policy toward North Korea, accepting it as a negotiation partner and moved the goal post in a way that it became easier for North Korea to make their gestures welcome to the United States. Now North Korea has both the need and opportunity coax the United States into a half-way deal. North Korea badly needs to have U.S. economic sanctions to be lifted. It badly needs to get assistance in energy and food at a time when the prices of both commodities are soaring high and both China and South Korea are becoming less generous with assistance to North Korea. Pyongyang now has the opportunity to make a deal with the United States as the outgoing Bush Administration is eager to leave a legacy where at least in one area—North Korean nuclear proliferation—it will have made a modicum of diplomatic success.

But has North Korea actually made the decision to give up completely, as for example Libya did in 2003, all its nuclear weapons, materials and facilities, and the ambiguity related to them? After all, it

is a program North Korea has been working on for nearly 30 years over two generations of leaders and at great costs and risks. For Kim Jong-Il, nuclear weapons are not only an essential security assurance and bargaining tool, but also an irreplaceable instrument of domestic control and political survival. Although the jury is still out on this question of whether North Korea will abandon its nuclear weapons, it is clear that North Korea will want to keep the nuclear weapons and the capabilities to make them for as long as it can.

On the U.S.'s part, a deal with North Korea, even though it is not a perfectly satisfactory one and it has an unpleasant smell, is better than no deal. It freezes the North Korean nuclear program; it gives the U.S. and others the handle to work on ultimate and complete denuclearization of North Korea; it gives the United States an opportunity to affect change and opening of the North Korean society; it helps to put a lid on a crisis on the Korean Peninsula. The best argument in defense of this deal is: "Have you got a better plan?" In fact, the Bush Administration over the years has regarded the Iranian problem more serious than North Korea because of its proximity to Israel, relationship with terrorist groups, and location in and near the oil fields.

China is obviously happy and relieved about the U.S.-North Korea negotiation. Even though Beijing has every reason to worry about a nuclear North Korea (probably more so than the United States), China has been counseling the United States caution, patience and accommodation with North Korea. China has had to balance its goal of denuclearizing North Korea with other equally important goals: preventing the collapse of North Korea and outbreak of an armed conflict in the Korean Peninsula.

The South Korean government of former President Roh Mu-Hyun, which had been advocating embrace of North Korea welcomed the policy change—from hard-line to negotiation with North Korea—of the Bush Administration. Its reasoning was that engagement, rather than pressure, would lessen the sense of insecurity that the North Korean regime feels and would bring about a change of heart, policy and society on the part of North Korea. The new, more conservative, government of President Lee Myong-bak is less generous, less indulgent, and less unconditional vis-à-vis North Korea. Ironically, however, South Korea's more reticent attitude toward North Korea has the effect of making cooperative relations with the United States more necessary and valuable to Pyongyang.

Japan, which used to be on the side of the United States for the most part before the latter's change of stance has now become the odd man out in the six-party process with its inflexible policy on the abduction issue. Ultimately, however, Japan would not wish to be left out of the process. Although Japan will continue to have misgivings about a deal with North Korea without a satisfactory resolution of the abduction issue, it will have no choice but to acquiesce to the other five members of the Six-Party talks as they seek to declare success with what is at best a half-baked success in denuclearizing North Korea.

Russia's main goal would be not to be left out of the process and ultimately re-enter the Northeast Asian scene on a key issue such as North Korean nuclear problem as a major actor. Russia has a strong economic interest in the course of North Korean denuclearization (particularly in connection with the construction of energy sector) and economic rehabilitation.

Are there any lessons one can draw from the experience of dealing with North Korean nuclear issue?

First, it was a good thing that the Bush Administration made a turn-about with its policy toward North Korea in early 2007. However, by renouncing the Geneva Agreed Framework of 1994 and initially insisting on a hard-line policy, the United States only allowed North Korea to produce more fissile material and more nuclear weapons. Furthermore, by allowing bilateral negotiation with North Korea only after its detonation of the nuclear bomb, the United States might have contributed to the conclusion by prospective proliferators that in order to be taken seriously by the United States it is best to make progress and make it fast in nuclear bomb manufacturing.

Second, all diplomatic means and efforts should be exhausted before any alternative means are contemplated. At the same time, the experience of the first North Korean nuclear crisis (1993-94) indicates that, even though saber-rattling is not helpful, diplomatic efforts would be more effective if they are backed up with credible resolve to use physical capabilities, economic, military and otherwise.

Third, in order for the diplomatic efforts to be successful, the potential and actual proliferators' economic and political needs, limitations and strengths should be taken into account. Oil rich Iran cannot be dealt with in the same way as the dollar, food- and energy-hungry North Korea.

Fifth, international cooperation is essential. Joint effort would be much more effective, despite the problems that come with it, than separate efforts by individual countries. International cooperation is not only essential as pressure on proliferators but also in detecting and preventing transfer of technology and material as happened with countries such as Pakistan and North Korea.

Finally, unless you intend to go to war over the issue, and it is usually a bad idea, it is better to make a deal and, if you have one, keep it. This is especially true when you have to deal with more pressing situations elsewhere.

In becoming a nuclear weapons state, North Korea has taken advantage of the U.S. being bogged down in the Middle East, oscillation of policies, disarray among the regional countries, and a brinksmanship attitude of North Korea that defied risks and dangers. However, economic difficulties, involving especially food and energy shortages, are making it hard for North Korea to develop and maintain its nuclear weapons program. This gives an opening to the outside world to denuclearize North Korea but only if they put their act together.

Let's hope that we are putting a lid on the North Korean nuclear issue and program even though we will not resolve it completely any time soon.