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UPDATE

NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR THREAT: A TEST FOR BILL CLINTON

(Updating Asian Studies Center *Backgrounder* No. 119, "Responding to the Looming North Korean Nuclear Threat," January 29, 1992.)

South Korea's new Foreign Minister, Han Sung-joo, arrives in Washington this week for talks with the Clinton Administration. This visit comes at a critical time. Bill Clinton is being tested by the world's longest-ruling Stalinist dictator, North Korea's 80-year-old Kim Il-sung. The North Korean dictator signalled his apparent determination to build nuclear weapons when on March 11 North Korea announced its decision to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)—the first country ever to do so. Evidence is mounting that a North Korean nuclear weapon may be imminent. On February 24, Central Intelligence Director James Woolsey said, there is a "real possibility that North Korea has already manufactured enough fissile material for at least one nuclear weapon."

The cost of failing to stop North Korea from obtaining nuclear weapons is high. At the very minimum, it may prompt an Asian nuclear arms race, and at worst, North Korea might sell nuclear weapons to Middle East terrorists, who could threaten Americans abroad and at home. The Clinton Administration must treat North Korea's nuclear challenge as a serious threat to global peace. Halting North Korea's nuclear program, while also avoiding a war on the Korean peninsula, must now be Clinton's first priority in Asia.

NUCLEAR THREAT IMMINENT?

The United States and its allies must recognize that North Korea could very soon have one or more nuclear weapons. U.S. intelligence sources were hinting in early 1992 that North Korea could have a nuclear weapon by mid-1993. Recent public statements by the new Director of Central Intelligence are consistent with his predecessor's assessment. Some South Korean government sources indicate that the North already may have more than one nuclear weapon.

Regardless of these estimates, it is well known that North Korea is working hard to build a bomb. Its nuclear research facility is located near Yongbyon, about sixty miles north of the capital, Pyongyang. At this site are two nuclear reactors capable of producing plutonium. A 30 megawatt reactor completed in 1987 may have been producing 15 pounds of plutonium a year, enough for one Hiroshima-size bomb. A larger 200 megawatt reactor may be completed this year—capable of producing 100 pounds of plutonium a year. Yongbyon is also known to have technology to reprocess plutonium into nuclear weapons material. Besides the Yongbyon facility, recent defectors say, North Korea has underground nuclear research facilities.

North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons would greatly enhance the threat posed by its 1.1 million-strong armed forces. In addition to 700 combat aircraft, North Korea soon may have a long-range missile to deliver nuclear warheads. With possible Libyan funding, North Korea is completing a modified Russian *Scud* ballistic missile with a 600-mile range. From North Korea, this missile could reach Beijing, Khabarovsk in Russia, Osaka in Japan, and all of South Korea. Nuclear weapons enable North Korea to pose a number of regional and global threats. They are:

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- ◆ **Threats to Korea:** Most directly threatened would be the 43 million South Koreans and the 37,000 U.S. troops there to help deter a North Korean attack. With nuclear weapons, North Korea can perpetuate its communist system and the division of the Korean nation.
- ◆ **Blackmail:** North Korea could use its nuclear weapons capability to pressure South Korea and Japan into making political concessions, such as removing U.S. military forces from their territory.
- ◆ **Nuclear proliferation:** Pyongyang's status as a nuclear power would encourage South Korea and Japan to obtain nuclear weapons to defend themselves.
- ◆ **Threats to Israel:** North Korea is an economic basket case. It can earn badly needed cash by selling nuclear weapons to radical Middle Eastern countries like Iran, Libya, and Syria—which already have purchased North Korean *Scud* missiles.
- ◆ **Nuclear terrorism:** North Korea also could market its destructive wares to terrorist groups bent on bombing American and other Western cities. North Korea, after all, is an experienced and enthusiastic practitioner of state terrorism. It blew up a South Korean airliner and its 115 passengers in 1987, and killed 21 people while trying to assassinate South Korean President Chun Dohwan during a 1983 visit to Burma.

LIMITS OF DIPLOMACY

North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT demonstrates the limits of using diplomacy to end the nuclear threat posed by that country. For three years now, South Korea, the U.S., Japan, Russia, and China have cooperated diplomatically to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program. In 1991, for example, the U.S. withdrew its tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea and agreed to suspend for 1992 the annual "Team Spirit" U.S.-ROK military exercises. In late December 1991, North and South Korea signed an agreement that promised unprecedented cooperation in political, economic, and cultural relations. Pyongyang and Seoul signed a second agreement in December 1991 in which both nations pledged not to "test, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons," or to "possess facilities for nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment." The latter agreement also promised to establish a commission to organize inspections by each side of facilities suspected of possessing nuclear capabilities.

North Korea, however, has failed to observe these agreements. Wider economic and cultural contacts, which might undermine the rule of Kim Il-sung, have not been allowed to flourish. North Korea remains a totalitarian state whose 21 million people suffer the burden of a steadily worsening economy. Recent visitors report power blackouts in Pyongyang, and the government exhorts its people to eat less and less as reports of food shortages abound. Notwithstanding, Kim Il-sung maintains his massive military forces and goes on pouring scarce resources into his nuclear program.

Pyongyang also refuses to fulfill its part of the 1991 North-South nuclear agreement. To date, the North has refused the South's invitation to inspect any of its facilities which Pyongyang believes to possess nuclear material. It also has denied access to North Korea by South Korean inspectors. Last year North Korea allowed six inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), a United Nations-affiliated agency charged with preventing diversion of nuclear materials for military purposes. But Washington and Seoul felt that these were not enough. Hence the request for access by South Korean inspectors. Seoul's fears apparently are well-founded. Late last year North Korea refused a seventh round of IAEA inspections, apparently fearing the discovery of its nuclear weapons program. After the IAEA on February 25 set a one-month deadline for Pyongyang to respond to the IAEA's request for inspections, the North Koreans answered by withdrawing from the NPT on March 11.

AMERICAN LEADERSHIP NEEDED

If North Korea ignores the IAEA's March 25 deadline, the U.S. should begin a campaign to end North Korea's nuclear weapons program. On March 25, South Korea's new Foreign Minister, Han Sung-joo, will arrive in Washington for consultations with the Clinton Administration. To underscore the gravity of this issue, Bill Clinton should reassure Foreign Minister Han of America's commitment to defend South Korea and state his determination to end North Korea's nuclear threat. A comprehensive program to end North Korea's nuclear threat should include:

- ✓ **Diplomatic carrots:** Clinton should declare that immediate North Korean resumption of IAEA inspections and near-term initiation of unrestricted North-South mutual nuclear inspections are preconditions for improved U.S.-North Korean relations, particularly in the area of trade.
- ✓ **United Nations action:** Washington and Seoul should lead an effort in the U.N. Security Council to focus world attention on North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT and its nuclear weapons program. Because time is critical, Washington should urge the U.N. Security Council to establish a deadline for North Korea's compliance with the NPT. If this deadline is missed, the U.N. should consider sanctions against North Korea.
- ✓ **Economic pressure:** Washington should consult with Seoul, Tokyo, Moscow, and Beijing on the range of possible economic sanctions against Pyongyang. Seoul already has stopped business investments in North Korea. Possible economic sanctions should include suspension by all nations of investment and trade with North Korea.
- ✓ **Pressure on China:** Washington should enlist Seoul and Tokyo in a campaign to convince Beijing of their common interest in imposing economic and political sanctions against an unrepentant North Korea. Chinese cooperation on economic sanctions will be critical, as North Korea now conducts most of its trade with China. However, on March 12, China blocked a U.N. Security Council effort to condemn Pyongyang's withdrawal from the NPT. The U.S. should make it clear to China that the strength or weakness of Washington's political and economic relations with Beijing will depend on its cooperation in stopping North Korea's nuclear weapons program.
- ✓ **Military options:** War against North Korea would devastate the Korean peninsula and must be avoided at every reasonable cost. But South Korea must be defended. Washington should offer to upgrade South Korean defenses with such modern weapons as *Patriot* missile-interceptors and the *J-STARS* radar aircraft, which can observe North Korean troop movements. Despite looming Pentagon budget cuts, the U.S. should not reduce its 37,000 troops now in the ROK.

CLINTON'S TOUGH TEST

Since 1950, successful management of U.S.-Korean relations has been a mark of successful U.S. Presidents. The last to stumble, Jimmy Carter—who sought premature U.S. troop reductions from South Korea—damaged both America's reputation in Asia and his own. Bill Clinton now faces a much tougher test in seeking to end North Korea's nuclear weapons threat.

With one-twentieth of its population in the military, Pyongyang is well-armed. The addition of nuclear weapons to its arsenal qualifies North Korea as extremely dangerous. It should be remembered that its current ruler, Kim Il-sung, started the Korean War in 1950. Since then he has threatened South Korea with border provocations and terrorist attacks. The difference now is that Kim Il-sung may soon have nuclear weapons, and at the age of 80, may have far less to lose today than he did in 1950.

Kim Il-sung's bloody determination should remind Americans of Saddam Hussein, whom the U.S. mistakenly underestimated before the Persian Gulf War. If the U.S. and its allies treat Kim Il-sung as they did Saddam Hussein, America's position as the world's major power, Asia's peace and prosperity, and Bill Clinton's reputation will all be at risk.

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