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DEFUSING NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR THREAT

(Updating Asian Studies Center *Backgrounder* No. 129, "North Korea's Nuclear Threat Challenges the World and Tests America's Resolve," February 23, 1994)

At a time when President Bill Clinton is being roundly criticized at home and abroad for lack of leadership and coherence in his foreign policy, nowhere are the stakes higher than on the Korean Peninsula. *The Wall Street Journal* warned recently that "North Korea could be the case where the Clinton administration pays a big price for its lack of consistency...."¹ There, the communist dictatorship of President Kim Il-Sung is threatening regional stability and the global non-proliferation movement with its maverick nuclear weapons development program. On June 2, President Clinton said that the U.S. may soon press for U.N. economic sanctions against the North, an action that the Kim regime warns it would consider an act of war. The Pyongyang government also maintains one of the world's largest and most heavily armed conventional militaries. The failure of diplomacy with the North could lead to another war on the peninsula, and Korea is the only remaining world hot spot where large numbers of American troops would be immediately in the line of fire. About 37,000 U.S. soldiers currently are stationed in democratic South Korea to assist in deterring the threat posed by the North.

It is time for the U.S. to make clear to the North what Washington is prepared to do once the Kim regime abandons its weapons program. This is necessary now because the White House has been pursuing an unnecessarily protracted negotiation strategy and has left unclear its terms for a final resolution of the dispute. This strategy only gives North Korea time to build nuclear weapons. Specifically, President Clinton should communicate to the North, and to the American people, his intention to establish first-ever diplomatic ties with Pyongyang and end the U.S. trade embargo against North Korea once the nuclear issue has been resolved. Pyongyang then will be forced to choose either the high road to improved ties with the U.S. or the slippery slope of nuclear proliferation and further international isolation. Such a move by Washington will also compel the People's Republic of China, the North's only powerful ally, to play a more positive role in ending this crisis.

The North Korean Game Plan

Since the early days of the Clinton presidency, North Korea has played a vexing cat-and-mouse game with the world community. Though Pyongyang signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985, for years it refused to allow for the international inspections required by the pact. After finally allowing United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials to visit the North early last year,

1 "North Korea Nuclear Crisis Flares Anew as Nation Says It's Forgoing Inspection," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 1994, p. A13.

Pyongyang unduly restricted the inspectors' access to key facilities. By March 1993, North Korea was threatening to withdraw from the NPT altogether.

This was followed by a flurry of official talks between U.S. and North Korean officials which, in turn, led to several apparent breakthroughs that subsequently were scuttled by Pyongyang. For example, last December, after intense negotiations with Washington, Pyongyang agreed to a new round of inspections by the IAEA. But, after more delays, the inspection did not begin until March 1, and even then the IAEA was blocked from visiting a key facility. Then, on May 14, Pyongyang began removing spent fuel from a nuclear reactor without the presence of IAEA observers. The North Koreans did this despite warnings by Defense Secretary William Perry that doing so would cause the U.S. to seek United Nations sanctions. Spent nuclear reactor fuel can be used to manufacture nuclear bombs.

A week later, on May 21, the North agreed to meet with the IAEA to discuss a plan for monitoring the reactor's fuel extraction. Armed with few attractive options, the Clinton Administration reacted to Pyongyang's latest maneuver by announcing that it would resume formal talks with the North if the IAEA reports that no fuel has been diverted for weapons purposes. Then, on June 2, the IAEA reported to the U.N. Secretary General that, due to the expedited pace of the fuel unloading, "the agency's ability to ascertain, with sufficient confidence, whether nuclear material from the reactor has been diverted in the past has...been lost."

Calling the IAEA's motives "sinister," the North Korean Foreign Ministry rebutted this accusation by charging that the U.N. agency had "failed to send a group of inspectors until refueling began, thus neglecting its duty." The statement asserted that sufficient fuel material had been set aside for subsequent scrutiny by the IAEA.

This North Korean behavior response fits a well-established pattern. Pyongyang for months has been playing a shrewd game of diplomatic brinkmanship, all the while taking care that its defiance of the IAEA does not constitute a formal breaking of the "continuity of NPT safeguards." By not stepping across that line, the North has successfully avoided international condemnation and the threat of U.N. economic sanctions. However, no progress in defusing the crisis was made, mainly because the Clinton Administration is merely reacting to events, and not guiding them.

Kim Il-Sung's Intentions

Most analysts believe that North Korea is pursuing one of two goals. On the one hand, Pyongyang may be angling to deal away its nuclear option at a point when it can maximize its return. Its faltering economy and extreme isolation are matters of great official concern, this theory holds. Eventually, the North will bargain away its nuclear program for diplomatic relations with the U.S., Japan, and other major nations as well as trade and aid from capitalist economies, including South Korea.

The second scenario is a bleak one. Diplomatic and economic openings to the outside world may be viewed as a threat to Kim Il-Sung's iron-grip rule. Kim is keenly aware that many other former communist governments, most notably the Soviet Union, were doomed by their reform and openness policies. According to this theory, the North's nuclear program is a play for survival. With a GNP one-tenth the size of the South's, the North can no longer match Seoul's military build-up. No nation, not even sympathetic China, is willing to assist Pyongyang in the event of a North Korean attack on the South. Nuclear weapons, real or suspected, might be viewed as the Kim regime's last line of defense—and a reasonably inexpensive one.

The Clinton Administration's Muddled Policy

Within the Clinton Administration, there is disagreement over which of these two theories is valid. This perhaps accounts in part for the misguided policy. Some officials believe that the North is willing to comply fully with the IAEA in return for ties with the U.S. These officials say Washington is needlessly dragging its feet. They believe Kim Il-Sung suspects Washington would eventually "move the goal post" regard-

ing improved relations and make numerous other political and military demands after the nuclear issue has been settled.

Others assert that Pyongyang is fully committed to building nuclear bombs, that the Administration is playing into the North's hands by allowing it additional time to nurture its weapons program.

During the past 15 months, Washington has held a series of senior-level and working-level talks with North Korean officials. But U.S. negotiators have not been specific enough in mapping out the future course of America's relations with North Korea once Pyongyang abandons its nuclear program. The Clinton Administration often has repeated a vague pledge to pursue a "broad and thorough" dialogue with the North as Pyongyang takes steps to satisfy the IAEA. This process would include consideration of eventual U.S. diplomatic and trade relations. In the meantime, the current strategy calls for a complex array of measured, quid pro quo actions by each side. For instance, after a U.S.-North Korean working-level meeting on May 23, the Clinton Administration said it would agree to a third round of "high-level" meetings if the IAEA is allowed satisfactory scrutiny of the reactor fuel removal.

It is under these circumstances that protracted U.S.-North Korean talks have dragged on for many months with little success. Donald P. Gregg, a seasoned Asia expert who recently served four years as U.S. ambassador to South Korea, describes the situation in this way: "Surprisingly, the administration has taken only a step-by-step approach to Pyongyang, never letting it see more than one step ahead in the long process of developing a new relationship based on a nuclear-free Korean peninsula."²

The Clinton Korea policy also fails to maximize the potential influence of the player with the most leverage in the North: China. When pressed by Washington to use its clout with Pyongyang, Beijing remains aloof, calling on the U.S. to "exhaust all diplomatic efforts" before taking any punitive measures.

The Chinese may in fact be using this stance to take advantage of Washington for their own benefit. The longer U.S. policy toward North Korea founders, the more America's stature in Asia is eroded and the more skeptical the international community becomes regarding Washington's prowess as a world leader. While the Chinese no doubt oppose North Korean nuclearization, they surely stand to gain as their Pacific Rim neighbors begin to question America's diplomatic and strategic clout in the region.

Getting Back on Track

The Clinton Administration's North Korea policies not only have been ineffective, they are chipping away at America's national interests in Asia. It is time for a bold and decisive shift in Washington's negotiating strategy. Specifically, the Administration should:

- ✓ **Support a U.N. resolution condemning the North for its behavior.** President Clinton's announcement on June 2 that the U.S. may move quickly to orchestrate a U.N. vote on economic sanctions is a risky course. China repeatedly has voiced its opposition to sanctions and holds veto power in the Security Council. On June 2, even Moscow and Tokyo signaled opposition to U.N. sanctions as a next step. The Clinton Administration should not set itself up for another foreign policy failure by pursuing a U.N. resolution that may be voted down or, if passed, may not be implemented by a key player such as China. Instead, it should ratchet up the pressure first with a resolution that condemns the North and warns of further action if IAEA compliance is not forthcoming. This leaves the President with more options and broader diplomatic maneuvering room.

2 Donald P. Gregg, "Offer Korea a Carrot," *The New York Times*, May 19, 1994, p. A25.

- ✓ **Declare that, once Pyongyang has ended its nuclear weapons program and completely fulfilled its NPT obligations, Washington will move swiftly to recognize the North Korean government officially and end the embargo on U.S. trade with the North.** North Korea would be faced with increasing pressure from the U.N. on the one hand and an incentive to seek a resolution on the other. For emphasis, President Clinton himself or Secretary of State Warren Christopher should make such a statement immediately.
- ✓ **Appoint a respected and experienced American as a special envoy to personally deliver this message to Kim Il-Sung on behalf of President Clinton.** North Korea is the world's most closed and regimented society. Although President Kim occasionally meets with foreigners in his own capital, he very rarely travels beyond his nation's borders. Some analysts suspect that his isolation may lead him to misinterpret American policy and world opinion. It is time for Washington to dispatch an envoy to explain its policies directly to the "Great Leader."
- ✓ **Consult closely with the Kim Young Sam government in South Korea so that these actions are taken only after there is full agreement between Washington and Seoul.** There is significant support in South Korea for revising U.S. policy. Above all, South Koreans yearn for a solution to the current crisis that averts war and allows the North to gradually ease its isolation and develop its backward economy. An unexpected collapse of North Korea in its current state would produce an enormous economic and social burden for the South.

On May 12, one of Korea's best known political leaders voiced his support for a new U.S. policy toward the North. Kim Dae Jung, a powerful opposition figure, called for a direct American offer of diplomatic recognition in return for a nuclear resolution. "We do not need to waste time any longer," he stressed. He added that Pyongyang should not be trusted but, rather, Washington and Seoul should "test its real intention."³

A clear-cut U.S. offer of recognition and trade relations would not be an undue concession to the North. Overlooked by many is that, beginning in the Nixon Administration, both the U.S. and South Korea embraced the concept of "cross recognition." According to the formula first articulated in 1973, America and Japan would be prepared to recognize Pyongyang once Beijing and Moscow signaled their willingness to recognize Seoul. Both China and Russia now have productive official relations with South Korea. Washington rightly has balked at recognizing the North because of the serious threat its nuclear program poses to regional as well as global stability.

Eventual normalization of U.S.-North Korean relations would serve the interests of all concerned players. The tide of history is on the side of America, South Korea, and other democratic nations. Increased economic, social, and political exchanges with the outside world will help gradually to lift the lid on North Korea's insular system and prod Pyongyang in the direction of internal reform. Coaxing the North out of its isolation would also help open the way for breakthroughs at the North-South bargaining table, where virtually no progress has been made despite decades of talks over inter-Korean tension reduction.

U.S. Policy Toward a Defiant Pyongyang

In the event that Pyongyang continues its intransigence after Washington redirects its policy, it will be clear that the negotiations were meant to buy time for the North and that it is intent on securing nuclear weapons. In this case, the U.S. should resort to a tried and true strategy of deterrence and containment. Specifically, the Clinton Administration should:

³ Speech before the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., May 12, 1994.

- ✓ **Strengthen combined U.S.-South Korean military capabilities.** President Clinton's recent deployment of *Patriot* missiles to the South was prudent. Other measures, including acquisition of counter-battery technology by South Korea to protect against the North's massive artillery arsenal and the deployment of U.S. *Apache* helicopters to South Korea, also were wise moves. More should be done, such as sending additional U.S. ground attack and fighter-bomber aircraft to South Korea. Moreover, the U.S. should bring the Second Infantry Division to full combat strength. This could be done by adding a third battalion to the two already on the ground in South Korea.
- ✓ **Press China to use its considerable leverage in Pyongyang.** Once Washington readjusts its policies, Beijing no longer can credibly call for further U.S. attempts at negotiations. In the event of continuing North Korean stonewalling, China should cooperate in applying increasing political and economic pressure on the North.
- ✓ **Apply economic pressure, either through the U.N. or through a multilateral coalition.** If the North rejects Washington's new offers, China will be hard-pressed to maintain its position that dialogue has not been exhausted. The Clinton Administration should confirm China's intention to support a U.N. sanctions vote before proceeding. In the event that Beijing continues to balk, the U.S. should mobilize its own coalition to curtail trade with the North. After all, China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia are Pyongyang's main trade partners. China might be convinced to cooperate through quiet, behind-the-scenes dialogue with the U.S. and the other interested nations of the region.
- ✓ **Be prepared to stop any attempt by Pyongyang to bolster its economy by selling its SCUD missile or nuclear technology to rogue states.** Washington and Seoul should now begin to mobilize the intelligence, special forces, and other military means necessary to intercept possible North Korean shipments of such materials.

CONCLUSION

President Clinton's confused Korea policy is damaging U.S. national interests. Its ineffectiveness is an international embarrassment that weakens America's image abroad. It also has allowed North Korea to gain unprecedented political leverage over the U.S. and its allies, as well as additional time to build nuclear weapons. The Administration's policy should be immediately redirected before North Korea succeeds in its nuclear ambitions. It is time to offer North Korea a final deal to end its nuclear weapons program. If it refuses, then Washington must mobilize its Asian allies and friends to confront and contain North Korea.

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