The crisis in North Korea

Rich Carlson

BASIC Notes, 23 April 2003

BASIC
British American Security
Information Council

Introduction

When the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on January 11, 2003, it sparked an unprecedented crisis in the history of the 35-year old treaty.

Withdrawal from NPT obligations requires three-month notification under Article X of the treaty, during which time the signatory is still bound by NPT requirements, including the use of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards at all nuclear facilities. It was this technicality that provoked the IAEA Board of Governors to pass a resolution on February 12, 2003, to report the DPRK to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for violation of its treaty requirements.[1] The UNSC has yet to meet regarding this report; meanwhile, the DPRK has accelerated its pursuit of a nuclear program. The deadline for effective withdrawal of the DPRK from the NPT therefore occurred on April 11, 2003, (although some NPT states parties have indicated that they will not recognize the withdrawal, effectively regarding it as inadmissible under the terms of the treaty).

The lack of a coherent or effective US response to the DPRK threat has allowed North Korea to determine the pace of events in this conflict. As the threat of North Korea becoming a nuclear power grows more likely, it is essential that the US Government re-examine its policy towards the DPRK. If the US administration will not readily do this, other states parties must bring their influence to bear. This Note sets out the nature of the problem and indicates a number of potential paths forward, although the complexity of the current crisis precludes clear or quick solutions.

The Note is divided into seven parts:

- The developments leading to the 1994 Agreed Framework;
- The Bush Administration's policy towards North Korea;
- Recent escalations in the tensions;
- Ways forward: bilateral vs. multilateral engagement;
- Current US diplomatic efforts;
- Security consequences of an escalation in the crisis; and
- Conclusions and recommendations.

The main conclusions reached are:

- The outcome of the current crisis will have a lasting impact on the international non-proliferation regime.
- The Bush administration needs to clarify its policy towards North Korea and reassert its dedication to the international non-proliferation regime.
- The crisis over North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT is an international issue that requires a more thorough response from the international community.

The key actions/outcomes needed from the 2003 NPT PrepCom are:

- A statement articulating the possible repercussions of non-compliance or withdrawal from the NPT by the states parties.
- An examination of nuclear weapons states' commitment to cessation of the arms race and nuclear disarmament under Article VI of the NPT.
- An affirmation and strengthening of negative security assurances offered by the nuclear weapons states.
- An assertion that the continued integrity of the NPT is an issue of international interest and needs greater commitments internationally.

The Agreed Framework

The DPRK became a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in December of 1985, but refused to fulfill its obligations to complete a safeguards agreement with the (IAEA) until the United States pulled its approximately 100 tactical nuclear weapons out

of South Korea in September 1991. After these US weapons were removed, the South-North Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was signed by both Koreas, providing for mutual verification of the halted nuclear programs.

The DPRK then finalized a safeguard agreement with the IAEA in January 1992, but following a string of discrepancies regarding inspection of North Korean nuclear facilities, and the removal of spent nuclear fuel from a North Korean facility without IAEA oversight, the DPRK announced it would withdraw from cooperation with the IAEA inspections in June 1994. The incident was resolved through bilateral talks between the United States and the DPRK resulting in the1994 Agreed Framework.

This Agreed Framework called for the freezing of the DPRK nuclear program and the canning and eventual removal of spent fuel rods from the five mega-watt reactor at Yongbyon, in exchange for the US establishing the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO).

Under the agreement, KEDO would develop a 2,000 mega-watt Light Water Reactor (LWR), as well as provide alternative energy sources (500,000 tons of Heavy fuel oil annually) during the interim period. The development of the LWR was to be completed by 2003. The Framework also articulated the responsibilities of North Korea to adhere to all obligations of the NPT, including IAEA verification inspections, and required the United States to provide a formal assurance to the DPRK that the country will not be targeted by US nuclear weapons.

Throughout the Clinton administration, significant steps were taken to end the DPRK's ballistic missile development and export programs. This included a deal offered by Kim Jong Il in the fall of 2000 to end exports of all missile technologies, including those under current (2000) contract as well as a commitment to freeze testing, production and deployment of all missiles with a range greater than 300 miles.[2] Under the Agreed Framework, discussions were required on the closure of the ballistic missile program. Though progress was being made in these discussions, they were halted by the change in the US administration.

The Bush Administration's Policy Towards North Korea

The Bush policy towards North Korea has been antagonistic from the start. The administration reversed the diplomatic advancements that had been made during the Clinton administration to reestablish normalized relations with Pyongyang and, in particular, refused to affirm the October 10, 2000, pledge from President Clinton that the United States and North Korea held "no hostile intent" towards each other.

Tensions mounted further on June 6, 2001, when President Bush issued a statement calling for North Korea to allow increased inspections of its nuclear facilities, to place further constraints on its missile program and missile exports and, finally, to adopt a "less threatening military posture." The President stated that North Korean compliance would "demonstrate the seriousness of its desire for improved relations."[3] However, the US demands offered no concrete incentives for DPRK compliance. Thus, while the United States made no attempt to fulfill obligations to complete the LWR by 2003, the administration renewed demands for DPRK compliance with the Agreed Framework.

In response to President Bush's demands, North Korea's Foreign Minister issued a statement calling on the United States to supplement electricity and supply heavy fuel oil shipments as required by the Agreed Framework. On June 28, 2001, the DPRK added: "If no measure is taken for the compensation for the loss of electricity, the DPRK can no longer keep its nuclear activities in a state of freeze and implement the Agreed Framework."[4]

Following the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001, North Korea

offered expressions of condolence, as well as a statement of opposition to all forms of terrorism and a professed willingness to cooperate with the United States to combat terrorism. The US response came as a slap in the face to North Korea. President Bush included North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" in his January 2002 State of the Union Address. Compounding this was the administration's Nuclear Posture Review: Classified portions of this document leaked in March 2002 identified North Korea as one of the target countries.[5] This stretched the limits of the Agreed Framework. Under Article III, item 1, the United States is to "provide formal assurances to the DPRK, against the threat or use of nuclear weapons."[6]

US policy towards North Korea has become further clouded with the administration's doctrine of preemption. The National Security Strategy specifically mentions North Korea as "the world's principal purveyor of ballistic missiles" and states: "We (the United States) cannot let our enemies strike first."[7]

Since the escalation of the DPRK nuclear program and mounting criticism of the administration's non-engagement, the Bush administration has changed its public response, stating that the United States is willing to talk to North Korea in a multilateral setting once the country's nuclear program has been halted. Despite this rhetorical change, until the recent intervening efforts of China, there was no direct contact with North Korea to set the terms for such a discussion, so the non-engagement policy has been maintained. Even as talks go forward now, the United States has made clear that these are only initial talks and that substantive negotiations will have to wait for the participation of other countries.

This confusion of rhetorical and practical strategies seems quite contrary to the policy articulated by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice back in 2000 when she wrote: "One thing is clear: the United States must approach regimes like North Korea resolutely and decisively."[8]

Escalation of Tensions

North Korea has engaged in a number of reactive tactics in response to perceived threats from the Bush administration, especially to the President's "Axis of Evil" remarks and the Nuclear Posture Review's targeting of North Korea. First, in October 2002, North Korea revealed a clandestine highly enriched uranium (HEU) program. Later, in December 2002, the DPRK stated that it had the right to develop nuclear weapons to counter the threat from the United States. The past few months have seen a "domino effect" of responses on the part of both nations serving to exacerbate the situation. Following the admission of a HEU program, in November the United States suspended heavy fuel oil shipments and all other obligations to North Korea under the Agreed Framework until the North's nuclear program was ceased.

In response to the loss of US fuel oil, North Korea took steps towards reactivation of the nuclear reactor at Yongbyon in January 2003, allegedly substituting the reactor output for energy sources dependent on US oil. These actions included the removal of IAEA surveillance equipment at the Yongbyon site and expulsion of IAEA inspectors from the country. The North Koreans then proceeded with the un-canning of spent fuel rods at the reprocessing facility and transport of necessary materials back to the Yongbyon reactor site.

Apparently as a response to statements by Secretary of State Powell that the Yongbyon reactor had not been restarted on February 25, the reactor came online the very next day, demonstrating that the North Korean regime is serious about following through on its threats. The output of the five mega-watt research reactor is not substantial enough to warrant its reactivation for energy purposes, and the absence of a substantial power

grid to utilize the energy output further complicates this decision. The main benefit of reactivation is to produce plutonium that could be separated at the additional reprocessing facility and used to build nuclear weapons.

While withdrawal from the NPT was a powerful assertion of the threat North Korea perceives to be under, it is also a dangerous escalatory step threatening the NPT regime.[9] The treaty does allow for a signatory to withdraw "if it decides that extraordinary events…have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country."[10] The US reaction to North Korea's stated NPT withdrawal was to place a dozen B-52 military bombers on standby for possible deployment to bolster forces in South Korea. Then North Korea threatened pre-emptive attacks in response to any buildup of US troops in the region, stating, "pre-emptive attacks are not the exclusive right of the U.S."[11]

North Korea has continued to escalate tensions in the region, by:

- Launching a short-range missile into the Sea of Japan during the inauguration of South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun;[12]
- "Escorting" a US reconnaissance plane with four North Korean Mig fighters;[13]
- Issuing a series of warnings of nuclear attacks and full-scale war if the US attacks its nuclear facilities;[14] and
- Launching several short to medium-range missiles throughout the past few months.[15]

These actions indicate North Korea's desire to gain international attention and heighten the need for the international community to address this developing crisis.

Just before planned North Korea, United States and China talks scheduled for this week (beginning Wednesday April 23), North Korea made an announcement on Friday, April 18 that appeared to claim that the reprocessing facility at Yongbyon had been reactivated. By Monday, however, North Korea had indicated that there was confusion over the translation and the facility had not yet been reactivated. One South Korean observer stated that "We might think North Korea intentionally made a mistake to see how hard-line is the US attitude," and noted that only after outcry from Washington over the initial English version, had North Korea ordered softer wording than had originally been disseminated. [16] While the President made clear that talks will go forward despite the reprocessing threats, rhetoric from administration officials seemed tougher – noting that the United States is "not prepared to offer any inducements to North Korea."[17]

Meanwhile, the United States has deployed 24 bombers to an Air Force base in Guam, within striking distance of the facility, as a deterrent to the plant's reactivation. The Bush administration continues to assert that the situation can be rectified through diplomatic efforts, but that military contingencies are "prepared and possible" as responses to further escalations. One recent report from Australia describes what is alleged to be one set of possible plans involving a US strike against North Korean heavy artillery in hills above the border with South Korea.[18] And a leaked Donald Rumsfeld memorandum calling for regime change in North Korea has opened a further foreign policy split in the Bush administration.[19]

Reactivation of the reprocessing plant seems to be the virtual red line that will invoke a US military response. However, with the lack of clear communication that has been the hallmark of administration's policy so far, it is difficult to know what specific action will provoke this response.

Bilateral vs. Multilateral Engagement

The United States has discussed the North Korean situation with regional allies such as Japan, South Korea and Russia, and other interested regional players, such as China. This was the primary agenda item for visits from US Secretary of State Colin Powell to Beijing and Tokyo while in the region to attend the inauguration of South Korean President

Roh Moo Hyun. The response has been a continuing assertion of concern from these countries over the prospect of a nuclear North Korea, and a pleading for the United States to engage in bilateral discussions as the DPRK has requested.

None of North Korea's regional neighbors has actually committed to imposing pressure on North Korea through sanctions or trade restrictions as the United States has advocated. China currently supplies 70% of North Korea's imported fuel oil, and has refused US pressures to cease fuel exports to North Korea. While the United States seemingly continues to hope that the DPRK regime will fall if fuel shipments cease, this result does not seem to be in line with China's wishes and policy direction. Rather, China's apparent concern is with a possible North Korean refugee crisis if conditions in North Korea continue to worsen, not to mention the political instability of Northeast Asia that would follow the fall of the DPRK regime. Other neighboring countries, including South Korea, share these concerns.

Some international attempts have been made to reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula, including South Korean emissaries to North Korea, and Russian and Chinese offers to act to ease tensions. These attempts have not been well received by the North Koreans, however, who feel that the real threat to their regime comes not from an international coalition, but from US nuclear warheads aimed in their direction, not to mention the 37,000 US troops on the southern side of the de-militarized zone (DMZ). In light of this military presence and the Bush administration's nuclear posture, the DPRK has requested a non-aggression pact with the United States as official assurance of the Bush administration's informal rhetoric of having "no hostile intentions towards" North Korea.[20] The DPRK views the United States as the primary threat to its national security and the only other signatory in the contested Agreed Framework, and thus makes the argument that anything but direct talks between the US and North Korea is irrelevant.

It may be that the talks planned in Beijing this week, will provide a breakthrough to begin negotiations, but while both countries agreed to participate in these talks they continue to reiterate their differing positions with regard to negotiations. US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher has said the meetings in Beijing are only "initial discussions" and that the South Korea and Japan should be included before an agreement can be reached on "substantive issues." [21] North Korea, in contrast, still maintains, "the DPRK's position about the nuke issue is to talk with the United States directly and bilaterally," a North Korean diplomat at the United Nations said. "China is aware of the DPRK's position."[22]

The United States also pushed for United Nations Security Council (UNSC) intervention in the crisis following North Korea's violation of its treaty obligations under the NPT. However, North Korea views its commitments to the NPT as an integral part of the Agreed Framework, which required that the DPRK adhere to the NPT.[23] When the United States ceased fuel oil shipments to North Korea in November 2002, the DPRK viewed it as both nullifying the Agreed Framework and its own commitments to the NPT.

To many international lawyers, such an interpretation is inconsistent with the obligations of NPT membership.[24] When the IAEA countered this presumption through its January 6, 2003, resolution finding the DPRK in violation of the NPT after the removal of safeguards from its nuclear facility on January 1, 2003, the DPRK formally withdrew from the NPT effective January 11, 2003.

US Diplomatic Efforts

The US approach to the current situation has been confused and ill defined. President Bush continues to assert that the situation in North Korea can be handled diplomatically, while also reassuring the nation that "every option, including a military one" is on the table.

Despite the rhetoric of diplomacy towards North Korea, the United States maintains its non-engagement policy, noting that it will not “reward” the DPRK with talks as result of “bad behavior,” and that talks would be tantamount to giving into North Korean blackmail.

The administration does refer to diplomacy with a multilateral coalition as an alternative to military action. Meanwhile, US military preparedness in the region has been intensified to counter any threat that might be presented by North Korea. Regional allies courted by the United States regarding diplomatic efforts have repeatedly requested that the United States engage in “direct talks” with North Korea as the DPRK has requested. However, the administration continues to argue over semantics, stating its willingness for “direct talks” with North Korea through a multilateral coalition, but continuing to deny “bilateral talks” as a possibility.

On March 9, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of State Colin Powell both justified this position by arguing that the outcomes and consequences of a resolution to the situation would dramatically impact other nations.[25]

The lack of a coherent or effective US response to the DPRK threat has allowed North Korea to determine the pace of events in this conflict. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 12, 2003, that the DPRK had only pulled out of the NPT recently - on January 11, 2003. He seemed to imply that rather than viewing the NPT withdrawal as an urgent crisis, the United States could take its time in addressing the issue. But the time frame of NPT treaty obligations from the time of notification of withdrawal to full nullification of obligations, including reprocessing and the development of nuclear weapons was only three months. The April 11, 2003 deadline of DPRK withdrawal from the NPT has occurred with no effective intervening actions from the United States.

Security Concerns

There are several major security and non-proliferation concerns that would arise from North Korea becoming a nuclear power. Prior to leaving office in February, former South Korean President Kim Dae Jung spoke out about the prospect of a North Korean nuclear weapons program: “If North Korea gets nuclear weapons, the stance of Japan and our country towards nuclear weapons would change.”[26]

Japan and South Korea have to date resisted development of a nuclear weapons program, claiming that retaliatory action by the United States – their key ally – would serve as enough of a deterrent. However, that policy has recently been seen to be shifting. Japan, like South Korea, has talked of developing a nuclear weapons program in response to North Korea’s nuclear development and military posturing.[27]

There has also been some limited discussion of pre-emptive Japanese attacks against North Korea should hostilities appear imminent. Steps towards raising Japan’s ability to respond have already being taken: the nation launched its first two spy satellites on March 27, 2003.[28] These satellites will allow Japan to observe North Korean military preparations and, if necessary, could allow the Japanese Government to prepare a preemptive strike.

With 37,000 US troops in South Korea and 53,000 US troops in Japan, plus thousands of US citizens who work, study or travel in the region, the immediate threat of North Korean hostilities towards these key US regional allies is of great concern. There is also increased concern that North Korea will be able to develop enough nuclear weapons to maintain a significant stockpile and also sell additional weapons to other rogue states or terrorist groups to supplement its ailing economy. The DPRK dedicates as much as 25% of its Gross National Product (GNP) to military expenditures. This has resulted in surplus military materials, such as missile technology, that have proved profitable for sale

to other nations. Should the DPRK nuclear weapons program prove successful and the development of a significant stockpile be permitted to proceed unfettered, these exports could expand to include nuclear materials and technology.

The development of DPRK nuclear weapons may present an even greater proliferation concern if the regime should fall. Neighboring countries are especially concerned that the fall of a nuclear DPRK regime would result in unchecked proliferation, including the procurement of nuclear weapons by extremist groups in their own countries. To prevent this scenario, it is more likely that China and other neighboring countries would lend economic support to a nuclear North Korea, than participate in any sanction regime that the United States or other countries might promote.

In his March testimony, US Assistant Secretary of State Kelly denied the implication that South Korea and Japan have accepted North Korea as a nuclear power, despite South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun's statement that he "…would rather have a nuclear North Korea than a chaotic collapse of the government there."[29]

In response to the pending threat of North Korean nuclear weapons targeting the United States and its allies, the Bush administration has promoted rapid deployment of the missile defense system. Recent requests from Secretary Rumsfeld include the deployment of the missile defense system by a target date of 2004 without operational testing of the system. This unproven system still provides no guarantee for the protection of the United States or its allies against North Korean nuclear weapons.[30]

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Bush administration's failure to act against the further development of nuclear weapons in North Korea could set a dangerous precedent for similar situations. Other nations, such as Iran, have initiated a strong push towards nuclear development and are aware of the impact that the outcome of the North Korean situation will have on the future of the non-proliferation regime. The Bush administration's refusal to "give in to nuclear blackmail" for fear of appearing weak in the face of an adverse situation, may effectively lead to a more disastrous impression that the United States will not attempt to combat the proliferation of nuclear weapons and will not seek to protect international treaty regimes. Pursuit of this highly confused US policy towards North Korea could lead to damaging results in both the long and short term for the United States, the region and the international non-proliferation regime.

While the DPRK asserts the United States' aggressive posture as the leading motivation for their non-compliance and withdrawal from the NPT, it should be recognized that the withdrawal of North Korea is an international problem. As the 2003 NPT PrepCom will no doubt address issues of non-compliance with the NPT by member states, including North Korea, the NPT regime should seek to put forth a statement expressing any consequences, which might befall the DPRK or any other non-nuclear weapon state seeking to withdraw from the NPT. While no specific consequences are cited in the NPT, there are no restrictions on the actions of individual nations to provide consequences in the form of trade sanctions or limitations that would result from withdrawal. The decision to impose sanctions against a non-compliant or withdrawing member of the NPT should be unanimous amongst all other NPT states.

The NPT PrepCom should also address the NPT obligations of the United States and nuclear weapon states parties. There are two main areas where nuclear weapons states, and the United States especially, are not living up to NPT commitments. First, Article VI of the NPT requires all NPT states parties to pursue effective measures relating to the cessation of the nuclear arms race and nuclear disarmament. This represents the fundamental bargain of the NPT – nuclear weapons states would disarm if non-nuclear

states agreed not to pursue nuclear weapons development. Non-nuclear weapons states have demanded progress on this at the recent NPT Review Conferences. The United States has made little progress in this regard, and in fact with the pursuit of new nuclear weapons capabilities as per the Nuclear Posture Review, the United States is arguably moving in the opposite direction.

Second, nuclear weapons states agreed in 1978 and again in 1995 that they would not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear NPT states. The US policy – like the policies of other countries including the UK – has been one of strategic ambiguity with regard to nuclear use in response to "weapons of mass destruction", particularly chemical or biological weapons, attack. This ambiguous policy has meant that the United States has signed on to NSA's but has simultaneous kept open or ambiguous the possibility of nuclear weapons response to chemical or biological weapons. Recently, however, with the issuance of National Security Presidential Directive 17,[31] US policy now explicitly articulates nuclear weapons as a possible response. Without question this further undermines NSA's – yet another fundamental part of NPT obligations of the United States. This policy directive on nuclear weapons use is likely to also influence the use policies of other nuclear weapons states and NATO.

A focus on both nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states and reiterating mutual obligations to adhere to the NPT and pursue further measures towards disarmament is critical to put the issue of nuclear proliferation and the North Korean crisis in a truly international context.[32]

Endnotes

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Rich Carlson is an intern with BASIC working on nuclear and transatlantic security issues. He is a graduate of Marist College in New York.