

Proliferation on the Peninsula: Five North Korean Nuclear Crises

By
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To reduce the risk of nuclear terrorism, we must prevent terrorists from obtaining nuclear weapons or materials. This will require, among other things, a sustained effort to keep dangerous nations from going nuclear—in particular North Korea. This article reviews the efforts the United States has undertaken through the years to keep North Korea from building a nuclear arsenal, arguing that the history of proliferation on the Korean Peninsula is marked by five nuclear crises. A sixth could be on the horizon, further compromising American efforts to lessen the likelihood of a nuclear attack on U.S. soil.

Keywords: nuclear proliferation; North Korea; Korean War; Agreed Framework; nuclear crisis

During the cold war, we were confronted by a hostile Soviet Union with thousands of thermonuclear weapons. Our strategy, deterrence, was easy to understand but hard to implement. The United States maintained a huge store of nuclear weapons on high alert, poised to destroy the Soviet Union if they launched nuclear weapons against us—or our allies. It was a dangerous strategy, but in the end, it worked.

Today the risk is not of a thermonuclear exchange. The danger is that terrorists will acquire a nuclear weapon and detonate it in on U.S. soil. Fortunately, no terror group is able to build a nuclear bomb from scratch; only a nation-state can manage a project of that complexity. For a terror group to obtain a nuclear bomb, they must buy or steal one from a nuclear power or, with more difficulty, construct one

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NOTE: This article is adapted from a speech delivered to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in November 2005.

DOI: 10.1177/0002716206290850

using plutonium or highly enriched uranium (HEU) acquired from a nuclear power or the nuclear black market. To reduce the risk of nuclear terrorism, therefore, we must keep terrorists from getting the bomb or the fissile material in the first place. That will require sustained action on three different fronts: dealing with the “loose nukes” problem; maintaining and strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); and keeping dangerous nations from going nuclear. This article addresses one aspect of the latter front: the efforts we have undertaken through the years to keep North Korea from building a nuclear arsenal.

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Nuclear proliferation on the Korean peninsula has been a recurring security problem for the United States since the creation of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948. In this article, I contend that the United States has experienced five distinct nuclear crises with North Korea. The first crisis, during the Korean War, was about whether the United States should use nuclear weapons during the conflict. The next four crises centered on North Korea's attempts to build a nuclear arsenal. Occurring in 1990, 1994, 1998, and 2002, these crises took place every four years and just happened to coincide with off-year elections in the United States. Some may disagree with my definition of these episodes as “nuclear crises” per se, but I expect to convince the reader that the essence of each of these crises was, in fact, nuclear in character.

The First Nuclear Crisis

The first nuclear crisis began with North Korea's invasion of the South. We now know, through access to Soviet archives, that Kim Il Sung had sought authorization from Stalin in 1949 to launch the invasion. Stalin vetoed this idea at least twice in 1949, but early in 1950 he had a change of heart and gave Kim Il Sung the green light. One of the unresolved mysteries is why Stalin at first refused and then finally consented. Four developments in 1949 could have influenced Stalin's thinking: the Soviet atomic test, the communist victory in China, the departure of American troops from South Korea, and the United States declaring that Korea was not in the “defense perimeter.”

With the go-ahead from Stalin, and with considerable logistics and air support from the Soviet Union, North Korea launched a surprise attack on June 25, 1950.

The attack was devastatingly effective, and it appeared that South Korean defenses would collapse in a matter of weeks. At this critical point in history, President Truman sent in American troops from Japan to stop the invasion—a bold decision that Stalin had not anticipated. But the American force, known as Task Force Smith, was overwhelmed and pushed back to a small pocket around Pusan. It seemed as if U.S. forces might be driven into the sea, and strong voices in the United States called for the use of nuclear weapons against North Korea. These voices were so strident that British Prime Minister Atlee became alarmed and made an emergency trip to the United States, where he argued, among other things, not to use nuclear weapons. Truman agreed and decided instead on a massive buildup in conventional arms. This decision, in effect, marked the beginning of the cold war arms buildup that was to last four decades.

American military forces held at Pusan until General Douglas MacArthur made his successful Inchon landing, forcing the North Koreans into a disorganized retreat to the north. MacArthur followed them almost to the Yalu River, at which point a huge Chinese force intervened, driving the American forces back to Seoul. Again Truman was pressed to use nuclear weapons, this time by MacArthur himself. MacArthur was fired for insubordination but went on to become a hero to those who favored the use of nuclear weapons. As his emotional speech to Congress forecast, MacArthur faded from the public spotlight, but his position on nuclear strategy did not; indeed, it replayed many times as the cold war progressed. After the initial retreat, American forces stabilized and the Korean War became a bloody and brutal stalemate.

The stalemate was an issue during the 1952 presidential election, with Eisenhower promising to bring the unpopular Korean War to an end. After Eisenhower was elected, however, he discovered that bringing the conflict to a successful end was not so easy, and again there was talk of using nuclear weapons. Possibly influenced by this discourse, in 1953 the North Koreans and Chinese did agree to an armistice that failed to satisfy either side but at least ended the war's staggering bloodshed. All told there were more than 400,000 casualties among United Nations' troops, two million among North Korean and Chinese troops, and three million among Korean civilians.

During the Korean War, therefore, there were three distinct instances when the use of nuclear weapons was threatened: at the war's beginning, when the Chinese entered the war, and just prior to the beginning of talks. Nuclear weapons were the dog that barked but did not bite. It is hard to say how much that barking influenced North Korea's actions during the war, but it is reasonably clear that it was a principal factor fueling their nuclear aspirations after the war.

1990: The Second Nuclear Crisis

Decades later, those aspirations gave rise to a second Korean nuclear crisis in 1990, this time over North Korean as well as American nuclear weapons. In the 1960s, the Soviet Union had provided North Korea with a research reactor and

some training for Korean engineers. As the Koreans became more proficient with nuclear technology, Kim Il Sung apparently decided to make use of this new-found know-how to build a nuclear weapon. During the 1970s, he asked the Russians and then the Chinese for assistance, but was turned down by both. Kim Il Sung apparently concluded that North Korea would have to get a bomb the hard way—by itself.

In 1989, American satellites captured evidence that this effort was reaching fruition. Detecting a large facility in an advanced state of construction near the town of Yongbyon, the United States correctly concluded that a nuclear weapons program was under way. They appealed to both the Russians and Chinese to pressure the North Koreans to submit to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection. But there was no real progress until the U.S. government pulled its tactical nuclear weapons out of South Korea in 1991. Within a few months of this development, the governments of North and South Korea agreed to keep the peninsula free of nuclear weapons. North Korea also agreed to submit to IAEA inspection. But they delayed the acceptance of inspectors long enough to reprocess a small amount of spent fuel from the reactor. When the IAEA inspectors did arrive, they conducted a thorough inspection and concluded that the North Koreans had produced more plutonium than the small amount they had declared. North Korea, evidently surprised at the thoroughness of the inspectors, refused them access to the spent fuel storage area for a more detailed examination.

1994: The Third Nuclear Crisis

Four years later, the United States came close to another war on the peninsula over North Korea's nuclear weapons program. This episode marked a third nuclear crisis in the series. In May 1994, as the Yongbyon reactor completed its fuel cycle, the North Koreans announced that they were withdrawing from the NPT and ordered the international inspectors to leave. They then began preparations to reprocess the fuel, which would have given them enough weapons-grade plutonium to make about a half dozen nuclear bombs.

The United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea announced their intention to impose severe sanctions if North Korea produced plutonium. But North Korea said that it would consider the imposition of these sanctions as an act of war and threatened to turn Seoul into a "sea of flames." Some dismissed this as rhetoric, but it was rhetoric that needed to be taken seriously. The Clinton administration reviewed a plan to conduct a preemptive surgical strike on the facilities at Yongbyon. Such a strike would have destroyed all of the facilities and fissile material at Yongbyon. But the likely result would hardly have been surgical, since it could have resulted in an attack on South Korea by the million-man North Korean army.

As secretary of defense at the time, I set that plan aside and undertook a detailed review of our plans for responding to a North Korean attack. This review

indicated that while the allies would achieve a decisive victory, there would be very high casualties on all sides. It was also clear that we could significantly reduce casualties by reinforcing our troops in Korea before hostilities began, so I directed preparations to augment our deployment in Korea with tens of thousands of troops.

While in the Cabinet room briefing President Clinton on the reinforcement plan, we received a call from Pyongyang that Kim Il Sung was ready to freeze activities at Yongbyon and begin serious negotiations. In the end, that crisis was resolved not by war but by a diplomatic agreement known as the Agreed Framework, negotiated for the United States by Robert Gallucci. The Agreed Framework required North Korea to continue indefinitely the freeze at Yongbyon, to be followed in time by the dismantlement of those facilities. In turn, the South Koreans and Japanese agreed to build new commercial light water reactors for North Korea, and the Americans agreed to supply fuel oil to North Korea until the light water reactors were completed (Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci 2004). From 1994 until 2002, the facilities at Yongbyon remained frozen; during those eight years these facilities could have produced enough plutonium to make perhaps fifty to one hundred nuclear weapons.

1998: The Fourth Nuclear Crisis

In 1998, the United States appeared to be heading for a fourth nuclear crisis with North Korea. The North Koreans had designed two long-range missiles that could reach targets in parts of the United States, as well as all of Japan. This missile program again raised a serious concern about North Korea's nuclear aspirations since an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) makes no military sense without a nuclear warhead. This concern came to a head on August 31, 1998, when North Korea launched one of these missiles over Japan, which landed west of Hawaii in the Pacific Ocean. This test fire led to calls in the U.S. Congress and Japanese Diet for a termination of the funding that supported the Agreed Framework. But if the Agreed Framework had been aborted, North Korea would have responded by reopening the nuclear facility at Yongbyon. And such a move would have put North Korea in position to produce the plutonium it needed for nuclear warheads.

During this turbulent and dangerous period, President Clinton established an outside Policy Review chaired by the author. After an intensive review, conducted jointly with the South Koreans and Japanese, we submitted our conclusions and recommendations. The key finding was that North Korea was undergoing terrible economic hardship, including widespread famine, but that those hardships were unlikely to cause the regime to be overthrown. We had to deal with the North Korean regime as it was, not as we wished it to be. We recommended that the allies establish two alternative strategies. First, if North Korea would forgo its long-range missile program as well as its nuclear weapons program, the allies would move step by step to a comprehensive normalization of

political and economic relations, including the establishment of a permanent peace. Alternatively, if North Korea did not demonstrate by their actions that they were willing to remove the threat, the allies agreed to take necessary actions to contain the threat.

In May 1999, I led an American delegation to Pyongyang to present those alternatives to the North Koreans. During the talks, it was clear that the North Koreans were seriously interested in the positive alternative. They saw that this plan would open the path to economic development in North Korea, which they desperately needed. But they feared that economic contact with the outside world would destabilize their regime's control of North Korea. So when our delegation left Pyongyang, we were not sure how the North Koreans would respond.

Within a few months, we saw substantial evidence of a general thawing under way. South Korea and Japan each held first-ever summit meetings with North Korea. Kim Jong Il visited the Shanghai Stock Exchange. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made an official visit to Pyongyang, where she met with North Korea senior officials and invited Kim Jong Il to come to Washington. Kim Jong Il responded to that invitation by sending a senior emissary, Marshall Jo, where he met with Secretary Albright and President Clinton in October 2000. My judgment at the time was that the United States was within a few months of getting the desired agreement from North Korea.

But at that critical junction, a new administration took office in the United States. Two months after President George W. Bush's inauguration, South Korean President Kim Dae Jung visited Washington for a confirmation that this engagement policy would continue. On his arrival, Secretary Powell vowed to continue the North Korea policy set by President Clinton. But the next day, when President Bush met with President Kim, Bush disowned the Clinton policy and said he would create a new policy. Engagement with North Korea was broken off, and for one and a half years, there was neither a dialogue nor a new policy.

2002: The Fifth Nuclear Crisis

Whatever policy might have developed was preempted by the discovery in 2002 that North Korea had secretly begun another nuclear program. And so began the fifth nuclear crisis with North Korea. The new program, established at a covert location separate from Yongbyon, was based on HEU instead of plutonium. In September 2002, Assistant Secretary of State James R. Kelly went to Pyongyang and confronted the North with these findings. The North Koreans at first denied the existence of the uranium program, but then became defiant arguing that they had a right to nuclear weapons because of the hostile attitude of the United States. The Bush administration then cut off the fuel oil the United States had been supplying under the Agreed Framework and persuaded Japan and South Korea to cease work on the reactor also called for under the Agreed Framework. In response to these steps, North Korea ejected the IAEA inspectors

at Yongbyon, reopened their reactor, and announced they were starting to reprocess the fuel rods. These actions effectively nullified the Agreed Framework. For the next nine months, the United States and North Korea were at a virtual standoff, with no real dialogue taking place and with the North Koreans continuing to operate their facilities at Yongbyon.

China became increasingly concerned during this period, and it pressured North Korea for multilateral meetings. As a result, there have been five meetings in Beijing, the last four of which involved six parties (the United States, North Korea, China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea). The first three meetings in Beijing, all in the first term of the Bush administration, made no apparent progress. The fourth meeting, held in September 2005 with Ambassador Chris Hill representing the United States, resulted in an understanding. The North Koreans said that they were prepared to give up their nuclear weapons; the United States said that it was prepared to pledge not to initiate military force to overthrow the North Korean regime. All sides agreed that North Korea was entitled to have a peaceful nuclear program. But the day after the meeting concluded, Pyongyang and Washington gave conflicting reports as to what the third component of the understanding really said. Washington said that full disarmament is the first step; then they would "consider" North Korea's request for a light water reactor. Pyongyang said that the light water reactor must be provided before any disarmament begins. Thus, we have a fundamental misunderstanding about the terms of the "understanding."

In the meantime, the North Korean nuclear program moves ahead at full speed. We have substantial and solid information about their plutonium-based weapon program. It is certain that they have the fuel to make eight to ten nuclear bombs. It is highly probable that this fuel has been reprocessed to make plutonium. It is likely that the resulting plutonium has already been used to make some or all of the bombs. And it is certain that the North Koreans have restarted their research reactor at Yongbyon to produce more plutonium.

We have much less confidence in information about their uranium-based weapon program. American government officials have said that North Korea has a covert weapons program based on HEU. North Korea says that it does not. A Pakistani scientist says that he gave technology and materials to North Korea for an HEU program. Libya reports that they have bought material and equipment for an HEU program from North Korea (Sanger and Broad 2004). A reasonable conclusion is that North Korea does have an HEU program, but it is probably not close to production. Taken together, the evidence is strong that North Korea is well on its way to building a sizable nuclear arsenal.

Conclusion: A Sixth Nuclear Crisis?

The growing nuclear arsenal in North Korea is a security disaster for several compelling reasons, including the likely domino effect on proliferation. But the

overriding reason is the possibility that a North Korean nuclear bomb will end up in one of our cities, not delivered by a missile, but by a truck or freighter. Al Qaeda has already stated unequivocally that it is seeking weapons of mass destruction. More chillingly, as reported by Graham Allison (2004), they have stated that they have a mission to kill 4 million Americans in revenge for specific wrongs that they believe the United States has inflicted on Muslim people. So we must take seriously the consequences of such a terror group gaining access to nuclear weapons, and the only plausible avenue for doing so is to buy or steal them from a nuclear power. If North Korea proceeds unchecked with building its nuclear arsenal, the risk of nuclear terrorism increases significantly.

[T]he overriding [security concern] is the possibility that a North Korean nuclear bomb will end up in one of our cities, not delivered by a missile, but by a truck or freighter.

Of course, terrorists setting off a nuclear bomb on U.S. soil would not be equivalent to the nuclear holocaust threatened during the cold war. But it would be the single worst catastrophe this country has ever suffered. Just one bomb could result in more than one hundred thousand deaths, and there could be more than one attack. The direct economic losses from the blast would be hundreds of billions of dollars, but the indirect economic impact would be even greater, as worldwide financial markets would collapse in a way that would make the market setback after 9/11 seem mild. And the social and political effects are incalculable, especially if the weapon were detonated in Washington or Moscow or London, crippling the government of that nation. For all of these reasons, checking the nuclear aspirations of North Korea should be a top security priority for the United States.

What is driving North Korea to pursue a nuclear weapons program so single-mindedly? While no one can really know what is going on inside Kim Jong Il's mind, he may believe that North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons is necessary to head off a preemptive attack from the United States (indeed, North Korean officials have suggested as much to me). Another motivation for the North Korean nuclear program may be economic. We know that there is a ready market for nuclear weapons and material, and North Korea, which is in desperate economic straits, has already stated its right to sell its nuclear wares. Finally, we should never underestimate the importance of the presumed prestige that

goes with being a nuclear power; certainly that was a factor in India's and Pakistan's decisions to go nuclear. In all likelihood, some combination of these factors is probably driving the North Korean nuclear program, as they have been for the past few decades. Any hope of stopping a program with so much momentum will require understanding and addressing these motivations.

The actions of the George H. W. Bush administration and the Clinton administration in the second and third crises addressed some of those factors and slowed or stopped the North Korean nuclear program for a period of time. But it did not stop their aspirations. The proposal the United States made to North Korea at the conclusion of the Policy Review addressed all of those factors, and I believed at the time that we would make a major breakthrough on this daunting problem. But we cannot redo history, so we will never know that for sure.

During the first term of the Bush administration, the United States did not make any proposals that the North Koreans deemed relevant. The last round of talks did advance the ball forward for the first time in five years. Nevertheless, it is much too early to claim victory. The dueling press releases from Washington and Pyongyang immediately after this indicated that the two governments were still far apart. As of this writing, the talks have been derailed, with several obstacles preventing a return to the negotiating table. Restarting the talks is not only necessary to advance our nonproliferation goals, but it is crucial in our efforts to reduce the risk of nuclear terrorism. If diplomacy does not resume, this year may witness the beginning of the sixth nuclear crisis with North Korea, which is grimly on schedule.

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