

Coping with the North Korean Nuclear Problem: A South Korean Perspective

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I. U.S. Approach to Non-Proliferation and North Korean Nukes

Preventing WMD Terrorism

The Bush administration's nonproliferation objectives were spelled out in the *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction* issued in December 2002. Specifically, that strategy has three main pillars:

- Counterproliferation to combat WMD use including active measures: (1) to prevent the threat from occurring via effective interdiction of WMD systems, materials, technology, and expertise being transferred to hostile states and terrorist organizations, (2) to seek to deter the threat if materializes, and (3) to defend against the threat if it is employed against the U.S., its allies, and friends.
- Strengthened nonproliferation efforts involving active diplomacy, multilateral and bilateral regimes, nonproliferation and threat reduction cooperation, controls on nuclear materials, export controls, and nonproliferation sanctions.
- Consequence management to respond to WMD use.

President Bush has stressed repeatedly that the greatest threat before human dignity is the possibility of secret and sudden attack with chemical or biological or nuclear weapons. The Bush administration is thus poised to channel all its energies into removing even the remotest possibility of "WMD terrorism." The Bush administration considers the three gravest threats of nuclear terrorism to be 1) lax control over and the consequent leakage of nuclear materials from the former Soviet republics, where 90 percent of the world's total nuclear elements are stored; 2) the possible sale of nuclear-related materials by rogue states such as North Korea and Iran; and 3) terrorist organizations' persistent attempts to

procure nuclear materials.¹ In this light, the U.S. policy toward the North Korean nuclear problem is aimed at neutralizing North Korea's attempts to become a nuclear state while preventing North Korea from transferring nuclear weapons or materials, if any, to other states or terrorists.

Hawk Engagement

The Bush administration hopes that North Korea's Kim Jong-il regime will "voluntarily" make a strategic decision to dismantle its nuclear development programs as Libya's Qadhafi regime did. Washington's preference for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue in the Libyan way was expressed positively by Rice during her visit to South Korea in July 2004. Rice, then national security advisor, stated, "The time has come for North Korea to make a strategic choice at the six-party talks in the direction of nuclear disarmament... I wish [National Defense Commission Chairman] Kim Jong Il would talk to [Libyan leader] Qadhafi, and he will know what I mean." Confronted with a rocky post-war reconstruction process in Iraq, however, the United States is of the mind that it can "manage" the North Korean nuclear issue limitedly as long as North Korea does not cross the "redline," or Washington's ultimate patience, by conducting nuclear tests or transferring nuclear materials outside the country.

U.S. approach to the North Korean nuclear problem is based upon the idea of "hawk engagement." Victor Cha, currently director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council (NSC), claimed that the crux of the "hawk engagement" policy was "based on the idea that engagement lays the groundwork for punitive action [in case the other party rejects or abuses engagement afterwards]."² Only when countries concerned, excepting North Korea, reach the consensus that "the failure of enhanced diplomacy should be demonstrably attributable to Pyongyang"—as the "Armitage Report" contends—will it be possible to form a coalition to execute a pressure policy on North Korea.³

¹ Regarding the global demand and supply of WMD, see Central Intelligence Agency, *Unclassified Report to Congress on the Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions: June Through 31 December 2002*.

² Victor Cha, "Korea's Place in the Axis," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2002.

³ According to the *Armitage report* (A Comprehensive Approach to North Korea), the U.S. leadership can be restored in the process of testing North Korea's intentions and discovering whether diplomacy holds any real possibility of yielding positive results. The report says, "This would enable us to bolster a coalition to deter and contain North Korea (should diplomacy fail)."

“Hawk engagement” failed to play a proper role during Bush’s first four years in office for two reasons. First, the Bush administration proclaimed the preemptive attack doctrine at home and abroad in the National Security Strategy of the United States of America (NSS) and the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) following the September 11 attacks, thereby giving the impression that it was a new doctrine Bush formulated for the first time and that his administration was seriously considering a preemptive attack to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Consequently, Pyongyang seized on Washington’s renewed preemptive attack pronouncements as a golden opportunity to launch a “propaganda campaign” peddling that hostile U.S. policies compelled it to develop nuclear weapons.⁴

North Korea’s obstinate strategy of “muddling through” that resists showing a real progress in the nuclear six-party talks will slowly exhaust the “patience” of the other five countries concerned, which in turn will provide the grounds for the United States to gradually tighten the screws on North Korea. One cannot rule out the possibility, then, of North Korea’s provocative actions in response.

It had been reported at the very end of 2002 that the Bush administration would prepare a “tailored containment” policy to put maximum economic and political pressure on North Korea so that it would abandon its efforts to make nuclear weapons. If North Korea refuses to forgo its nukes, the United States would impose economic sanctions through the UNSC, and the U.S. military might intercept missile shipments to prevent North Korea from proliferating the transportation vehicle of WMDs to other regions. The plan also calls for the United States to encourage North Korea’s neighbors, i.e., China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea to limit or even sever economic ties with North Korea.⁵

Tailored containment is different from simple containment in that the former is more systematic and proactive than the latter that means the waiting for the enemy’s collapse. George Kennan’s containment policy of half a century

⁴ There is good deal of misunderstanding and confusion about the concept of preemptive action. Preemption is usually associated with military strikes, but financial, diplomatic, and law enforcement measures also can be used in preemptive ways to enhance security. M. Elaine Bunn, “Preemptive Action: When, How, and to What Effect?” *Strategic Forum* (INSS, National Defense University), July 2003.

⁵ On New Year’s Day of 2003, however, President Bush told reporters in Crawford, Texas that the North Korean situation was not a military showdown but a diplomatic showdown and that it could be resolved peacefully through diplomacy. Nevertheless, few people believed the tailored containment policy had been removed for good from the list of U.S. policy options.

ago called for the political isolation of the Communist countries by means of a slow strangulation through the development of political and military alliances. The Bush administration appears to be considering a more sophisticated policy by which the United States would withdraw or reduce “goodies” on which North Korea is dependent, i.e., food and energy. The United States would “tailor” its containment policy to maximize North Korea’s political and economic vulnerabilities to the surrounding countries. For this policy to be successful, however, it is necessary to form a regional consensus that efforts to resolve the nuclear problem in a peaceful manner have been exhausted. Without this consensus, the containment of North Korea’s Kim Jong-il regime is unworkable.

Against this backdrop, it is less likely that the United States will replace the current Six Party Talks with the bilateral talks with North Korea. The United States will just allow the bilateral talks within the context of the Six Party Talks. Should the United States enter into bilateral talks while the North claims the Six Party Talks useless, North Korea might then drag on the talks for a matter of months, thus potentially riding out what could be the worst period of international reaction to its nuclear declarations and ambitions. By the time such bilateral talks end or collapse, the focus would likely be upon the mutual recriminations as to who was responsible for the breakdown of the talks, rather than the acceptability of North Korea’s withdrawal from NPT and its declaration of its nuclear status.⁶

Sustained Interest in Freedom and Human Rights

In her opening statement during the Senate confirmation hearing in early 2005, Secretary of State Rice asserted: “In these momentous times, American diplomacy has three great tasks. First, we will unite the community of democracies in building an international system that is based on our shared values and the rule of law. Second, we will strengthen the community of

⁶ Gordon Flake, “Additional and Dissenting Views,” in Morton I. Abramowitz & James T. Laney, *Meeting the North Korean Nuclear Challenge: Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations* (New York: CRF, 2003). But, James A. Leach, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific expressed some flexibility toward U.S.-North Korean bilateral talks by saying “The U.S. should recognize that while the six-party framework makes eminently good sense, there is nothing theological about negotiating methodology. Just as we have bilateral discussions within a six-party framework, we can have informal or formal bilateral discussions in other frameworks” at the CSIS and Chosun Ilbo May 17th Conference on *Prospects for U.S. Policy toward the Korean Peninsula in the Second Bush Administration*.

democracies to fight the threats to our common security and alleviate the hopelessness that feeds terror. And third, we will spread freedom and democracy throughout the globe. That is the mission that President Bush has set for America in the world ... and the great mission of American diplomacy today." By stressing as much, Rice declared that "the spread of freedom" made up the core of Washington's foreign policy.⁷

Christopher Hill, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, stated when he was the US ambassador to South Korea: "I'd also like to address some of the problems that go beyond just this immediate and enormous problem of nuclear weapons. I'd also like to address some of the problems of human rights in North Korea... This is not a US issue... They cannot even be a regional affair. They're an international affair... I think we need to find ways to get the North Koreans to understand that disarming their weapons is essential, but the beginning of a process of treating its citizens with dignity and respect according to international rules is also essential... In short, we are looking for change of behavior, not necessarily a change of people."⁸ Thus, Hill made explicit Washington's stance that, while it will not directly link the North Korean nuclear and human rights issues, it will devote sustained attention to Pyongyang's human rights situation.

Against this backdrop, Washington's appointment of a special envoy on human rights in North Korea may possibly pave the way for the practical linkage between the nuclear issue and the human rights problem. The implementation of the North Korean Human Rights Act will be accelerated and the discussion on the ADVANCE Democracy Act of 2005 will be activated at both Houses.

II. Six-Party Talks and North Korean Strategy

North Korea's Shift

North Korea has finally come to the fourth round of the nuclear six-party talks. It has been thirteen months since the third round of talks did not come up with a breakthrough last June. South Korea, China, and the United States have made utmost efforts to revive the six-party talks particularly for the past five

⁷ President Bush then confirmed it by using the word "freedom" 49 times in his inaugural speech for a second term.

⁸ Remarks to the *Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation*, October 25, 2004.

months since North Korea's Foreign Ministry issued a statement Feb 10 declaring that North Korea possessed nuclear weapons and that it would indefinitely suspend participation in the talks until conditions are met. North Korea's leader Kim Jong-il elaborated on those conditions at the meeting with the Chinese envoy Wang Jiarui in Feb 21. First, the United States should guarantee North Korea's security; second, the Bush administration needs to explain why it has branded North Korea as an "outpost of tyranny"; third, North Korea is willing to negotiate with the U.S. on the equal basis; and lastly, the U.S. should show reliable actions to North Korea.

North Korea has increased the stakes by putting conditions to its participation in the Six-Party Talks. Key to the recent shift, however, was South Korea's offer to supply a vast electrical grid to the North, a modification of U.S. rhetoric against North Korea, and a possible recognition by the North that time was running out for them in seeking a negotiated accord. A number of recent events indicate there is "some hope" of a breakthrough.

North Korean Strategy

Before North Korea came to the fourth round of nuclear talks, it had appeared to be more interested in the brinkmanship strategy. If anything, the lesson that North Korea has taken from the first nuclear crisis is that a more rapid pace of escalation is necessary and in the North Korean interest.⁹ North Korea's pace of unraveling of the Agreed Framework, steps to return to its old path of developing and reprocessing plutonium for use in nuclear weapons, and the Feb 10 declaration of nuclear possession that was followed by the recent announcement of the spent fuel rods extraction have been quicker than many had anticipated. North Korea may well believe that the "fear" among the concerned parties - that the situation could be rapidly escalated - will contribute to driving a wedge particularly between Washington and Seoul. North Korea may still be tempted to resort to this lesson if its position was not well taken by other concerned parties in the six-party talks.

In fact, from the North Korean point of view, the situation today should be seen as much more advantageous than the first nuclear crisis of a decade ago. In addition to being so close to having all the pieces together for manufacturing nuclear weapons, it has the United States preoccupied with post-war Iraq; a

⁹ Scott Snyder, "Coercive Diplomacy, Crisis Escalation, and Future Directions for U.S. Policy Toward North Korea," paper written for IFANS, December 2003, p.5.

South Korean government which opposes U.S. military action against North Korea; seeming divergence in the alliance relationship between Seoul and Washington; and the benefit of the “lessons” it learned from the 1993-4 experience, especially the lesson that you need to make the stakes as high as possible.

To be sure, the North also faces certain disadvantages today over the last time around. For one thing, the Bush administration is less amenable than its predecessor to a deal with North Korea. Secondly, North Korea is much more economically dependent and therefore vulnerable to economic pressure from other countries, including South Korea, Japan and China as well as the United States. But, North Korea may well conclude that any temporary loss in economic assistance from the outside would be worth the wait and the risk, after which it can expect to land a much larger and more lucrative deal.¹⁰ If this kind of strategy is still workable, North Korea is unlikely to make a strategic decision to give up its nuclear programs in the fourth round of talks or afterwards.¹¹

III. North Korean Nukes and ROK-U.S. Alliance

Intersection of Trends

Against this backdrop, the current crisis represents the intersection of trends that could dramatically affect the alliance’s future. Korean nationalism and anti-American sentiment have been fed by differing perceptions of Pyongyang and fears that Washington will not take Seoul’s interests sufficiently into account.¹² The crisis also will be an important bell-weather of future U.S.-Chinese

¹⁰ Interview with Han Sung-Joo, Former ROK Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ambassador to the United States, April 30, 2005.

¹¹ There is no disagreement that the ultimate aim is to denuclearize the peninsula. However, the meaning the participants attach to the words differ significantly. When South Korea and the United States say the peninsula must be denuclearized, they mean complete dismantling of all North Korean nuclear programs encompassing weapons-usable plutonium and a suspected uranium enrichment program. North Korea, on the other hand, feels it is to dismantle all its nuclear programs, including power facilities, then South Korea must do the same. The North also alleges U.S. troops in the South have nuclear weapons.

¹² Regarding the emergence of anti-American sentiment in the context of the U.S.-ROK-DPRK triangular relationship, see Kim Sung-han, “Brothers versus Friends: Inter-Korean Reconciliation and Emerging Anti-Americanism in South Korea” in David I. Steinberg, ed., *Korean Attitudes toward the United States: Changing Dynamics* (Armonk, New York: M.E.Sharpe, 2005), pp.180-195.

cooperation on the peninsula. It will also provide important hints to Japanese officials struggling with their own security policy as to Washington's ability to handle a key security threat.

Having demonstrated a strong commitment to multilateral negotiations, Washington now must do everything possible to make those discussions work. A negotiated solution that eliminates the nuclear threat represents the best outcome for the future of the alliance, peace and stability in Asia and the global community. That certainly appears to be the case when considering the alternatives, a Pyongyang armed with a growing nuclear arsenal, the chaotic collapse of North Korea after a period of isolation or military action triggered by fears of a nuclear North exporting bomb-making material. In short, Washington's repeated assertions that it wants a diplomatic solution has to be translated into real action which inescapably means negotiations and a process of give and take.

Perception and Policy Gap

Differences over how to deal with North Korea are nothing new. During the 1994 nuclear crisis and its aftermath, Washington seemed more interested than Seoul in reaching a negotiated settlement. But these differences were often over tactics and priorities, resolved in large part because of the glue that bound the alliance together—the common perception that North Korea represented a serious security threat.

President Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine policy began to change that perception. In spite of criticisms that he conceded too much, more than half the South Koreans polled at the end of his term indicated that North Korea had changed and believed the specter of war had disappeared. After the June 2000 inter-Korean summit, as news about the North became increasingly commonplace, what had historically been an unknown monolith became a more "real" picture. This, combined with joint athletic teams at international competitions, increased trade, family reunions, and the reconnection of the railway through the DMZ, has made Pyongyang appear to be more of a poor relative than a serious threat.

As long as the United States shared the same policy of engagement in dealing with Pyongyang, this change appeared to be manageable. But the election of a new U.S. administration skeptical about that approach and even more focused on the threat posed by North Korea has put the two allies at odds. That skepticism became fully apparent after September 11 and President Bush's

“axis of evil” speech in January 2002, a pronouncement that hit a raw nerve in Korea. The disclosure of Pyongyang’s secret uranium enrichment program in October 2002 and the subsequent breakdown of the 1994 Agreed Framework only served to highlight the growing perception and policy gap.

From the perspective of President Roh Moo-hyun’s government, the Bush administration’s perceived interest in fostering Pyongyang’s collapse or in using military force to resolve the nuclear issue is unacceptable. Both would threaten the lives of the South Korean people as well as the economic and political progress made over the past three decades. Magnified by other tensions in the relationship—anti-American sentiment and concerns about the United States acting on its own—this perception of the Bush approach to North Korea has become the prism through which South Koreans view the security relationship. This accounts for the view among many that the plan to redeploy the 2nd Infantry Division away from the DMZ is a prelude to a U.S. attack on Pyongyang.

Perceptions have begun to shift. It appears to Americans that President Roh more clearly understands the need to at least have in reserve the possibility of tougher measures and to Koreans that President Bush is committed to a peaceful resolution. However, differences still remain. And exactly how these differences affect the alliance will depend on the outcome of current efforts to deal with North Korea.

Granted, a substantial portion of the South Korean population still harbors a highly skeptical view of Pyongyang. But even conservatives are concerned about U.S. policies that have seemed to emphasize tough measures to the detriment of a peaceful solution.¹³ A well-managed process of negotiation—which will require shifts on the part of Seoul and Washington—would have

¹³ *Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and East Asian Institute* jointed conducted a survey on ROK-U.S. relations and North Korea in July 2004. The polling outcomes to a question asked in South Korea (Under what circumstances do you approve U.S. preemptive military strike against North Korea?) were as follows: If North Korea continues to accumulate nuclear materials although it has not actually turned them into a nuclear bomb (6%); If North Korea tries to sell nuclear materials to other countries and/or terrorists (15%); If North Korea tests nuclear bombs (20%); If North Korea test-fires long-range ballistic missiles that can reach the U.S. territories (13%); If North Korea’s attack on South Korea is imminent (0%); If the North Korean regime continuously violates human rights in a gross and systemic manner (7%); I do not approve U.S preemptive strike against North Korea under any circumstances (39%); Not Sure/ No Answer (0%). We can see that unconditional anti-war sentiment was very high in South Korea as of July 2004. *U.S.-South Korea Combined Topline Report* (CCFR & EAI, July 2004).

positive benefits for the alliance. On the other hand, the North's nuclear escalation may become so obvious—for example through conducting a nuclear test—that threat perceptions and policies could converge once again. The worst outcome for the alliance would be a worsening crisis and the perception that the United States was at fault.

If negotiations are properly conducted—through close cooperation with Seoul and others-- there could be a positive spillover for the alliance. It could dampen (although not eliminate) anti-American sentiment and the damage caused by differing threat perceptions of Pyongyang as well as enhance prospects for future U.S.-Chinese cooperation. On the other hand, if the U.S. breaks ranks and forms a coalition of the willing to deal with a recalcitrant North Korea, that could have the opposite effect, only stressing the alliance further. Of course, North Korea could take drastic actions—such as setting off a nuclear test—that could dramatically increase threat perceptions in Seoul and minimize stresses on the alliance.

IV. Coping with North Korean Nukes

Scenarios

(1) Peaceful Resolution

This scenario would involve the situation in which North Korea declares it will give up the nuclear development program. North Korea would completely dismantle its nuclear facilities, materials, and weapons; as a *quid pro quo*, countries concerned will provide security assurance as well as generous economic assistance to North Korea, ultimately raising it into a responsible member of the international community.

(2) Gradual Deterioration

North Korea returns to the nuclear negotiating table but clings to a “foot-dragging” strategy. The United States keeps a close eye on North Korea's actions and, after weighing the fluid situations in Iraq and Iran, opts to mount pressure on North Korea within a limited scope rather than taking an all-out, direct approach. The situation keeps declining while the options are being exhausted in the gradual manner.

(3) Confrontation

The momentum of the dialogue is lost due to North Korea's refusal to forgo its nukes and owing to its demands for the impossible, such as calling on the United States to withdraw its troops from South Korea. Pyongyang continues to harness a foot-dragging strategy as it calls for "the principle of simultaneous actions" or "the principle of a package settlement" as counterproposals to Washington's "road map for the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue." The United States, however, sets a deadline for the resolution of the nuclear issue and launches an intense pressure campaign against North Korea. This leads to the containment of North Korea. Seeking an about-face in the prevailing situation, however, Pyongyang could intentionally drive the crisis to the climax and attempt a dramatic settlement of the problem.

Making Coercive Diplomacy Workable

For "coercive diplomacy" to work, it is necessary for the coercer to set clear objectives and to show strong leadership so that its message may not be disjointed.¹⁴ The message is that the United States is seeking both denuclearization and non-proliferation and that it would not allow North Korea to become a nuclear power at any cost. The United States should make every effort to get this message to be shared by its allies and friends.

In this light, the United States and other concerned parties should be clear regarding the precise terms of settlement in the crisis. If specific conditions are not clearly spelled out, the target of coercive diplomacy may continue to resist. The carrot and the stick should thus go together. Inducements or punishments are the key. Carrots for North Korea may include economic and energy assistance, security assurance and diplomatic normalization, while sticks such as international pressure and economic sanctions will follow, if North Korea continues to resist.

The real red line for the administration is to prevent the DPRK from transferring nuclear weapons or materials to other states or terrorists. So far, the administration has established the PSI to block such transfers. But PSI alone is no guarantee that a transfer would not take place because of the technical difficulties of detecting nuclear material. The administration would want to signal to North Korea that any transfers would not be tolerated. Of course, the most worrisome red line for the ROK is a conventional attack from the DPRK.

¹⁴ Regarding prerequisites for the success of coercive diplomacy, see Alexander George & William Simons, eds., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

The ROK's leadership will likely continue to urge the United States not to risk war on the Korean peninsula. The dilemma is: can the ROK and the United States work together to prevent nuclear weapon or material transfers while reducing or at least not provoking the likelihood of a conventional armed conflict? Perhaps a counter-terrorism coalition among China, the ROK, Japan, and the United States can work to increase the chances of detecting transfers. In parallel, those states must communicate to North Korea that they do not intend an attack against it and would defend against an attack from North Korea. Obviously, this approach requires a delicate but firm balancing act.¹⁵

Combining Carrots and Sticks

The road map for nuclear resolution, which was proposed by the United States at the third round of the Six-Party Talks last June, should contain a more specific list of carrots and sticks. Then, it can be used so that North Korea may predict what kinds of "goodies" and punishments are waiting for North Korea. This is the starting point from where the six-party talks may well proceed and North Korea's salami tactics may be curbed.¹⁶ In this light, South Korea's "important proposal" has contributed to removing uncertainties in the roadmap in the significant manner.

North Korea cannot dismantle its half-a-century-old nuclear programs unless it believes its future is assured. In this sense, the United States needs to be somewhat more specific about the contents of its so-called "bold approach." A "mini-Marshall Plan" should be worked out. At the same time, South Korea should chart solid food, energy, and economic assistance programs that can be offered to North Korea in the case the latter adopts a cooperative attitude and abandons its nuclear program, which, needless to say, would mark a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue.

Considering North Korea's ongoing economic plight, it is incumbent upon South Korea to make parallel endeavors in the following areas: 1) accurate assessment of the content and size of assistance North Korea needs; 2) sustained, reinforced diplomatic efforts *vis-à-vis* neighboring countries for equitable burden-sharing; and 3) mapping out a long-term financial plan to ensure domestic fund procurements and stepping up public diplomacy with the aim of

¹⁵ Interview with Charles D. Ferguson of Council on Foreign Relations, January 17, 2005.

¹⁶ See Appendix for the roadmap that seems to be agreed upon by the U.S., ROK, Japan, China and Russia.

consensus-building.

But, at the same time, all five parties concerned – South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the U.S. - should intensively consult with each other concerning the so-called “Plan B.” In other words, they need to let North Korea know how it will be punished if it continued to resist and how it will be rewarded if it made a strategic choice. All five concerned parties need to say they have a “blockbuster” ready if North Korea rejoined the six-party talks and need to show some preview clips for the North.¹⁷

The Bush administration sees engagement as the best practical way to build a coalition for punishment in the future. Such a coalition is critical to putting effective pressure on the North, but maintaining it will require its members to agree that every opportunity to resolve the problem in a diplomatic manner has been exhausted. Allies should be convinced non-coercive strategies have already been tried and failed. That is why the Bush administration is showing a fair amount of patience *vis-a-vis* North Korea.

Inducing China to Use Leverage

There are two variables in China’s Korean Peninsula policy: 1) China needs to avoid confrontation with the U.S. over Korean peninsula issues so that it can maintain continued economic growth; and 2) China needs to keep its strategic leverage over North Korea and it thus sends the message to the U.S. that the U.S.-N.K. relationship, even if normalized, should not replace the China-N.K. special relationship and that China instead would not seek the China-ROK relationship as a substitute for the U.S.-ROK alliance relationship.

Then, questions arise: 1) To what extent is China willing to exert its influence over North Korea? ; 2) Does China want ultimate solution to the North Korean nuclear issue or just try to “manage” it? ; 3) Is the U.S.-China cooperation over the North Korean nuclear issue strategic or tactical? ; and 4) Is the North Korean issue coupled with the Taiwan issue from the perspective of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship?

Washington first of all needs to go beyond its recognition of North Korea as a sovereign state. In addition to providing some preview clips for a blockbuster, it needs to send a message that Washington can take the path of rapid decline.

¹⁷ At a congressional hearing in May 27, 2005, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill and Deputy Undersecretary of Defense Richard Lawless promised U.S. “flexibility” if North Korea joined the six-party talks.

With a louder whisper that is both sincere and determined, then, Beijing can continue to convey the messages that North Korea cannot be a nuclear nation even though Beijing understands North Korea's concerns and will conditionally continue to support the DRPK if Pyongyang negotiates and reforms its economy.¹⁸

Being Prepared for Failure of Diplomacy

What if North Korea closes the window of opportunity? It won't be able to survive the nuclear deadlock. North Korea's future is not to be assured by the U.S. or others because North Korea, like the former Soviet Union, is full of systemic contradictions. The real threat for North Korea could come out of within, not from outside, unless its own fallacies are well managed. It is true that North Korea is changing as we can see in the cases like the introduction of capitalist economic measures and the participation in the industrial project with the South in *Gaesung*. South Korea is willing to help North Korea to be successful in the *Gaesung* project. But, this would not be possible without North Korea's cooperation on the nuclear problem.

Being prepared for the failure of negotiations also will be important. The prospect of a North Korea with a growing nuclear weapons arsenal could create new stresses for the ROK-U.S. alliance. The danger will be another perception and policy gap, this time between Washington's fears of nuclear exports and Seoul's concern that measures to stop those exports might provoke serious tensions, perhaps even war. In the event of failure, Washington and Seoul should work together to hammer out a joint approach that could include firm public statements by the United States reminding Pyongyang that its nuclear umbrella was still in operation. It might entail Seoul's joining the Proliferation Security Initiative designed to stop exports, not only of drugs and counterfeit money, but also weapons of mass destruction and related materials.

Things could be worsened if North Korea takes the path of becoming a nuclear power and continues to make the stakes higher. The reality is that a nuclear North Korea is likely to be virtually isolated from the international community. In this sense, Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul should also be prepared to deal with the consequences of a possible collapse of North Korea. While such joint planning has taken place in the past, it should be updated to

¹⁸ Anne Wu, "What China Whispers to North Korea," *Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2005.

deal with key humanitarian, political/legal, security and economic issues. Regional cooperation will be essential in coping with these potential problems.

Against this backdrop, North Korea should take the opportunity to become a responsible member of the international community rather than trying to buy time to improve its nuclear capability. When all five concerned parties of the six-party talks agree that the failure of enhanced diplomacy is attributable to Pyongyang, they will have no other options but to transform the six-party talks into a punitive coalition against North Korea.

V. Conclusion

For the six parties to sketch a solution to the nuclear problem and devise concrete follow-on steps at the six-party talks, an audacious determination is called for on the part of the Pyongyang regime—a decision that is premised on a complete dismantlement of its nuclear program. Depending on its nature, Pyongyang's verdict just may mark a critical watershed in the North Korean nuclear issue.

Even if the parties to the six-way talks could hammer out a “words for words” agreement, they may still be exposed to mounting tensions and instability during the process of “actions for actions”, or the implementation and verification process of the agreement if the United States and North Korea fail to bridge their differences on the scope of dismantlement and compensation. Should Washington take the lead in applying measures to pressure North Korea, the diplomatic choices made by the other states involved, particularly South Korea, will be pivotal.

Upholding the principle of resolving the nuclear issue peacefully via dialogue, Seoul has continued to cooperate with and provide aid to the North Koreans while repeatedly urging them to express the intent to give up their nuclear program. Should the six-party talks fail to produce a breakthrough soon, however, the international community, starting with the United States, may request South Korea to speed down on inter-Korean economic projects and cut down on aid to North Korea. Questions will be raised regarding whether and when the nuclear issue should be brought to more coercive mechanisms such as the UN Security Council. It remains to be seen if South Korea will be able to provide clear-cut answers to them.

Appendix : Roadmap for Nuclear Resolution

