



IDSS COMMENTARIES (29/2002)

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SEEKING AID BY THREAT: NORTH KOREA'S STRATEGY FOR SURVIVAL

Chung Chien-peng *

15 November 2002

Summary: North Korea's surprise admission that it was enriching uranium to develop nuclear weapons has the world scrambling to respond, albeit in different ways. While the United States is trying to gather an international coalition to pressure Pyongyang into unilaterally giving up its nuclear programme, Japan attempts normalization talks with North Korea, South Korea wants to continue its engagement with the North, and China and Russia reiterate their support for a nuclear-free Korean peninsula. The admission by North Korea is a desperate bargaining ploy by a country facing economic collapse to demand more aid to buttress the regime.

Why did North Korea's leader Kim Jong-Il admit to United States envoy James Kelly last October that his country was engaging in a secret programme to develop nuclear weapons? Was it sheer defiance of President George W Bush's depiction of it as part of an "axis of evil"? Or was it a negotiating ploy to pressure Japan into normalizing relations with North Korea? Or a desperate attempt to hold out an olive branch to Washington, and indirectly to Tokyo, with the hope of getting aid for North Korea's economic survival and regime preservation?

Kim Jong-Il made his admission when confronted by James Kelly with evidence provided by the CIA that Pyongyang was producing enriched uranium, just like it was doing before the signing of the 1994 Agreed Framework between US and North Korea. That agreement had required Pyongyang to abandon its graphite-moderated nuclear reactor at Yongbyon and not to quit the NPT as it had threatened to do. In exchange, an American-led consortium would help North Korea build two light-water reactors (LWR) with financial and technical assistance from South Korea and Japan, and provide oil shipments to Pyongyang before their completion.

The current nuclear programme seems to have started after the inauguration of the Bush Administration, which Pyongyang considers to be less accommodating to its demands than its predecessor, and before the U S President named North Korea as a member of the "axis of evil" along with Iraq and Iran. It involves enriching uranium to weapons grade in gas centrifuges, with know-how and equipment purchased from a laboratory in Pakistan. (The Pakistani government has denied knowledge of the deal.)

Facing domestic difficulties and international reproach, Pyongyang's beleaguered stance is reflected in the three conditions it has set for the resolution of the nuclear imbroglio: US diplomatic recognition of North Korea; a "non-aggression treaty" between Pyongyang and Washington; and no hindrance to North Korea's development – (translation: more economic aid). North Korea has also threatened to end its current moratorium on missile testing if Japan does not normalise relations with it soon and provide USD 10 billion in compensation for Japan's colonial rule over Korea from 1910 to 1945, a threat that Japan has dismissed.

US Reaction

By Bush's own doctrine of pre-emptive strike against any state which has weapons of mass destruction and an irresponsible dictator, the US should launch an attack on North Korea. However while Secretary of State Colin Powell has interpreted the North Korean admission as meaning that the 1994 Framework was effectively nullified, President Bush described the North Korean nuclear issue as "an opportunity, not a crisis," presumably a chance to resolve security concerns over Pyongyang's nuclear-processing capability once and for all. To quote Bush, "this is certainly a chance to draw North Korea out of its shell and make it a responsible member of the world community." To this end the US is trying to build an international coalition to pressure North Korea into abandoning its nuclear weapons programme.

The US could order the current shipments of 500,000 tons of fuel oil to North Korea to be cut off and stop the construction of the first LWR which has just begun, if Pyongyang does not accept international inspectors at its Yongbyon nuclear plants. But this has risks – e.g., North Korea could decide to "uncan" the plutonium rods to make the uranium-enrichment devices operational, and if the US tries to knock out Yongbyon, it could unleash its artillery and short-range missiles on Seoul. According to one estimate such an attack could kill up to a million people including the 100,000 American troops in South Korea. Some analysts think North Korea believes that the US cannot launch a military strike now because South Korea is a hostage and the US has Iraq to deal with. They believe that was what made Kim Jong-Il own up to his continuing nuclear weapons programme.

The Bush Administration has been trying to assure Americans and allies that North Korea's nuclear disclosure would be addressed through diplomacy and not military action. However, if the US attacks Iraq over the suspicion that Baghdad may be having nuclear weapons or the means to make them, it will have to find some compelling excuse for not doing the same with North Korea.

Japan's Reaction

If North Korea's nuclear admission was a negotiating ploy to pressure Japan into normalizing relations with it, and also an act of contrition to match its earlier apology to Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro for the kidnapping of Japanese citizens in past decades, it failed to elicit any welcoming response from Tokyo. Even before the start of normalization talks in Malaysia in late October both Koizumi and Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko had hinted that Tokyo would be prepared to freeze the negotiation unless Pyongyang was prepared to adhere to the 1994 Framework and halt its programme of enriching uranium and building intercontinental missiles. While the North Koreans wanted to focus exclusively on economic assistance from Japan and normalization of diplomatic relations, the Japanese flatly

refused to discuss those matters until Pyongyang dismantled its nuclear facilities, released the family members of Japanese abductees visiting Japan, and also gave an accounting of the other abductees whom North Korea said were dead. Although the North Korean side belatedly offered a package solution to all outstanding issues which the Japanese side wanted to discuss, the Kuala Lumpur talks ended in stalemate. Success on the normalization front is not likely in the near future as long as the nuclear and abduction issues are not resolved to Japan's satisfaction and US intentions are unclear.

South Korea's Reaction

South Korean President Kim Dae-jung urged the US not to renege on the 1994 Framework and clearly signalled that he wanted to see the problem resolved through negotiations. He was against cutting off oil shipments to North Korea, predicting that so doing would lead to a nuclear crisis on the peninsula. Kim clearly has a stake in wanting to continue dialogue with Pyongyang as part of his "Sunshine Policy" of unconditional engagement with the North. Lately cash-strapped North Korea has even allowed South Korean investors to begin building an industrial park at the border town of Kaesong just north of the DMZ, provided they supply the water, power and communications facilities for the park. However South Korea's policy towards the North may change after presidential elections in December, in which the candidate of the conservative Grand National Party, Lee Hoichang is favoured to win. Both Lee and Chung Mong-joon, the candidate running second, have tied further economic assistance to North Korea's compliance with the 1994 Framework, which is closer to the position of the Bush Administration than Kim's.

China's Response

Although Chinese President Jiang Zemin assured President Bush at the recent APEC Summit at Mexico's Los Cabos that they should work toward a peaceful resolution of the issue and keep the Korean peninsula nuclear-free, China is unlikely to consider itself a possible target of any North Korean nuclear weapon. Rather China has more to fear from a political collapse of the regime in Pyongyang, which could bring South Korean and American troops all the way to North Korea's border with China. Chinese leaders would admonish North Korea in private, as would Russia's Vladimir Putin. However should Bush call for economic sanctions on North Korea, he is unlikely to find them receptive. Cutting off whatever meagre humanitarian aid that Pyongyang is getting from the outside world will hardly make the regime more accommodating to demands to dismantle its nuclear programme than a US threat to strike North Korea.

Coalition Deal

There is only one real alternative for the US, Japan and South Korea – negotiating a deal with North Korea, under which Pyongyang would give up its nuclear weapons and missiles, with outside verification; all sides would agree to end the hostilities of the Korean War with a peace treaty; and western countries and Japan would normalise relations with Pyongyang and start providing North Korea with both emergency and regular economic aid. At Los Cabos, the leaders of the US, Japan and South Korea demanded that North Korea immediately and verifiably dismantle its programme to enrich uranium, although they have yet to work out what punitive sanctions they may apply against Pyongyang if it fails to comply. Ahead, the three countries will hold a meeting on policy towards North Korea under the rubric of a Trilateral Coordinating and Oversight Group (TCOG). The question is, will

the three allies tell North Korea in no uncertain terms that this would be the last time they are prepared to deal with Pyongyang on the nuclear issue through diplomatic means? If they do, North Korea would no longer be able to carry on trading empty promises for monetary assistance in the expectation that others will continue to pay for peace.

North Korea's Plight

North Korea badly needs foreign assistance to keep viable its limited but ambitious economic reform programme, such as raising grain-purchasing prices for farmers, allowing for privatisation of farmlands and the inauguration of a free-trade zone at Sinuiju. All these capitalistic reform measures are indications that North Korea's hermitic socialist economic system has failed. It is estimated that six million of its 22 million people depend on international food aid, and almost half of its children under the age of five suffer from chronic malnutrition. Refugees from North Korea continue to stream across the border into China. Factories lie idle for lack of power, and most hospitals have run out of anaesthetics.

The latest attempt to attract aid through nuclear brandishing reflects another crude manifestation of Pyongyang's "beggar-cum-mugger" approach to find a way out of the economic malaise and ideological bankruptcy facing the regime. The day of reckoning will come when it can no longer rely on fear or favour by foreigners to buy off its elite and keep its long-starving populace quiescent.

The US and allies can make no deals with the North Koreans until they first agree to the US demand to dismantle their nuclear weapons programme entirely. In the meantime, for the sake of Northeast Asia's peace and security, outside powers should seize on North Korea's willingness to talk to keep it talking.

* Dr. Chung Chien-peng is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies. He specialises on security issues in Northeast Asia.