



Thanks to Libya, North Korea Might Never Negotiate on Nuclear Weapons

While the Iran deal sparked hope that North Korea might be next at the negotiating table, it doesn't seem likely that will happen anytime soon...

Doug Bandow

September 2, 2015

The Obama administration's success in negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran has led to hope that a similar agreement might be reached [with North Korea](#). Halt your program, dismantle some of your capabilities and accept intrusive inspections in return for "coming in from the cold."

Unfortunately, there's [virtually no chance of that happening](#). The North already has a nuclear capability and views preservation of a nuclear arsenal as critical for domestic politics as well as international policy. Moreover, the West's ouster of Libya's Moammar Khadafy is seen in Pyongyang as dispositive proof that only a fool would negotiate away missile and nuclear capabilities.

Many, if not most, Korea experts long ago lost hope that the North was prepared to dismantle its nuclear program. In word and action, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) had demonstrated its commitment to being a nuclear state. While none of its neighbors desires that outcome, the North has ample reason to be well armed.

First, only an atomic bomb offers certain deterrence against the overwhelming military power of populous and prosperous South Korea backed by the U.S. superpower. Nuclear weapons also are a handy weapon of extortion. The ultimate bomb offers an important reward to a military that plays an important political role. Only an extraordinarily good offer could convince any country, especially the DPRK, to deal.

Second, even a good offer looks suspect in light of U.S. and European support for the ouster of Libya's Khadafy. He, too, negotiated with the West, sacrificing his nuclear, chemical and long-range missile programs. He was encouraged to act by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which had not yet soured. Moreover, his son Saif—currently held by one set of Libyan rebels and recently sentenced to death in absentia by one of Libya's nominal governments—reportedly advocated making a deal to draw Western investment and trade.

President George W. Bush, wannabe-scourge of evil, nevertheless promised that Libya's "good faith will be returned." Khadafy was feted in European capitals. Tripoli was cited as a model for

Iran, with North Korea to follow. Said the West: Give up your WMDs and a world of benefits will be yours, including security, trade and investment, diplomatic recognition and international respectability.

However, four years ago, the U.S. and European governments saw their chance. Under the guise of humanitarianism—Khadafy never massacred civilians, which the allies claimed they wanted to prevent—Washington and Brussels promoted low-cost (to them) regime change. Some analysts saw the West's unabashed aggression as validating the earlier negotiations: "Imagine the possible nightmare if we had failed to remove the Libyan nuclear weapons program and their longer-range missile force," [asserted Robert Joseph](#), who participated in nonproliferation negotiations.

Alas, the self-satisfied celebration of Libya as a "good war" quickly dissipated after that nation suffered postwar atrocities, loosed weapons across the region, generated rogue militias, spawned two governments, descended into incipient civil war and became another battleground for Islamic State forces. A grand victory it turned out not to be.

Now Libya also stands as a stark warning against nonproliferation, at least by any government believing itself to be in Washington's gun sights, or as having geopolitical ambitions that the United States might want to thwart. In return for paper guarantees, Khadafy sacrificed a military trifecta, including the one weapon that could have deterred the United States and Europe from taking advantage of his vulnerability.

The North Koreans took immediate note. The [Foreign Ministry observed](#): "Libya's nuclear dismantlement much touted by the U.S. in the past turned out to be a mode of aggression whereby the latter coaxed the former with such sweet words as 'guarantee of security' and 'improvement of relations' to disarm and then swallowed it up by force." The celebrated disarmament agreement was "an invasion tactic to disarm the country." The ministry insisted that events demonstrated how the North's military-first policy was "proper in a thousand ways."

Korea University professor Ruediger Frank argued that Pyongyang's leaders felt "deeply satisfied with themselves" after the West's perceived betrayal of Khadafy. [In Pyongyang's view](#), the Libyans "took the economic bait, foolishly disarmed themselves, and once they were defenseless, were mercilessly punished by the West." In this case, the North Koreans were right.

Of course, the Obama administration would not admit its mistake. At the time, State Department spokesman Mark Toner claimed: "Where [the Libyans are] at today has absolutely no connection with them renouncing their nuclear program or nuclear weapons." This was nonsense. Had Khadafy possessed nukes, chemical weapons and/or missiles, the allies almost certainly would have kept their planes and drones at home. And Khadafy probably would still be in power.

The DPRK was wrong to assume that the allies pursued denuclearization as part of a conscious plan of premeditated treachery to disarm and then oust the Libyan dictator. However, the effect was the same. And Pyongyang has no reason to believe that the allies would not take advantage of a similar opening against the Kim dynasty.

Nevertheless, the Iranian negotiations have revived hopes that the DPRK might be enticed into following suit. Author [Mark Fitzpatrick argued](#) that the lesson the North should draw "is that the

United States is willing to come to terms with detested enemies.” State Department spokesman John Kirby said the United States was prepared to talk even to nations with “long-standing differences” with America. Under Secretary of State [Wendy Sherman suggested](#) that implementation of the Iran agreement “might give North Korea second thoughts about the very dangerous path that it is pursuing.”

Park Won-gon of Handong University argued that the pact “gives room for Washington to focus on North Korea.” He believed that success was possible if the United States “keeps in mind that Pyongyang turned into a nuclear-weapon state for such reasons and takes measures accordingly.” The Sejong Institute’s [Paik Hak-soon urged the United States](#) to “reconsider Pyongyang’s demand for a change in its hostility to the Kim Jong-un regime.”

Even the Chinese cited the underlying principle. The Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, said that the Iranian deal was an “active model” for the North. In his words, it represented a “win-win” spirit and demonstrated that talks could solve an issue, “however difficult the problem.” Explained a *People’s Daily* [commentary](#): the agreement, which Beijing backed, “can be a positive reference for the handling of other regional hotspots, including the Korean peninsular nuclear issue.” Opined [Wu Zurong of the China Foundation for International Studies](#): “The signing of the Iranian nuclear agreement sets a precedent for the international community to solve disputes through political and diplomatic channels.”

Alas, Kim Jong-un took power only a couple months after Khadafy was killed in rather gruesome fashion. That event was likely imprinted upon his consciousness. He has demonstrated his determination to maintain power—the regime has executed some four hundred Korean Workers Party officials since he succeeded his father. Most dramatic was the killing of his uncle; a vice premier and the defense minister recently suffered the same fate. Kim isn’t likely to give up his most important weapon to deter outside intervention.

After announcement of the Iranian agreement, the North Korean foreign ministry issued a statement explaining that the situation of the North was “quite different” from that of Iran and that Pyongyang was “not interested at all in the dialogue to discuss the issue of making it freeze or dismantle its nukes unilaterally first.” After all, the DPRK was a nuclear state and faced ongoing threats from the United States. Thus, its nuclear deterrent was not “a plaything to be put on the negotiating table.” North Korea’s ambassador to China, Ji Jae-ryong, reiterated the same points: “The nuclear deterrence of the DPRK is not a plaything to be put on the negotiating table as it is the essential means to protect its sovereignty and vital rights from the U.S. nuclear threat and hostile policy.”

This should surprise no one. Fitzpatrick contended that the Iranian deal showed that the United States “treated the Iranians as equal negotiating partners, according them respect and collegiality.” But Washington treated Libyans that way, too. Which didn’t stop the United States and its allies from ousting the same government a few years later. Washington never has let international law, past relations or even good sense stop it from using its enormous power to advance whatever it perceives to be its interests whenever it deems convenient.

It never was likely that the DPRK would give up its nuclear weapons. But the Obama administration’s Libyan misadventure makes that prospect even less likely. And the impact

might not stop there. Other governments, too, may decide to seek nuclear weapons for security since no foreign state, no matter how close it might appear to be to Washington at any point in time, can feel secure from a future attempt at regime change.

Entering Libya's civil war turned out to be a serious mistake. But the conflict has done more than destabilize North Africa. The West's eagerness to overthrow a government that had given up nuclear weapons creates yet another incentive for proliferation. Washington may rue this precedent for years to come.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of several books, including Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire (Xulon).