

**SPECIAL REPORT****Surprise: North Korea Is Enriching Uranium!**

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North Korea is nothing if not predictable. It has unveiled a new nuclear enrichment plant. The U.S. and its allies are now scrambling to respond.

Surely the latest development in the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea surprises no one.

If the issue weren't so serious, it would be a comedy routine. The Obama administration came into office hoping to put the North on the back policy burner. Last year Pyongyang staged another nuclear test to remind America that it was still around.

The Republic of Korea's conservative government reversed the "Sunshine Policy" of its predecessors, cutting off most subsidies for the DPRK. In March the North sank a South Korean warship. Supposedly tough-minded ROK President Lee Myung-bak did little more than whine. Rather than closing the Kaesong industrial development, which provides North Korea with much-needed hard currency, Seoul demanded an apology.

Apparently unable to resist the Sirens' call for negotiations, President Lee recently announced that an apology was no longer necessary. All Pyongyang had to do was "show sincerity toward the Republic of Korea and to assume responsibility" for the sinking.

After sending an aircraft carrier to demonstrate its solidarity with the South, the Obama administration also began pressing for resumption of the Six-Party Talks, the so-far spectacularly unsuccessful nuclear negotiations. President Barack Obama said all that was necessary was for the DPRK to demonstrate "seriousness of purpose."

Well, seriousness of purpose was demonstrated by Pyongyang, only the wrong kind.

The North recently began construction on a new light water nuclear reactor, apparently to replace the one previously decommissioned at Yongbyon. That was bad news, but remained only a future threat. More ominously, however, it now appears that North Korea is engaged in uranium enrichment.

The North invited Stanford University Professor Siegfried S. Hecker to visit its newest

uranium enrichment facility in Yongbyon. Hecker found a modern operation with 2000 centrifuges, apparently ready for business. He said the plant looked to be directed at nuclear power, but "the uranium enrichment facilities could be readily converted to produce highly-enriched uranium (HEU) bomb fuel."

While the project's capabilities may not meet the North Koreans' claims, the facility was built quickly, since April 2009, when inspectors were last on site, and kept secret. This suggests that the DPRK may have greater nuclear capabilities than previously thought.

The Obama administration reacted with ill-disguised shock. An administration spokesman stated that the North's behavior is "yet another provocative act of defiance." Who would have imagined? The North Koreans defiant! So the State Department deployed its heaviest diplomatic artillery, sending a delegation to Asia to "begin to coordinate on a response to this news." Undoubtedly "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il is hiding in his underground bunker, fearful for his life.

The latest crisis is merely the latest rerun of an earlier show. The North has trashed previous agreements. The regime has never demonstrated a serious commitment to abandon weapons which have taken so much effort and expense to develop. And the West has never offered the North benefits anywhere close to the obvious gains for the North from becoming a nuclear state.

First is defense against any attempt at regime change. Pyongyang surely has noticed that the U.S. routinely bombs and invades non-nuclear powers, such as Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Serbia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Washington does not similarly treat nuclear powers.

Second, no one would pay the slightest attention to North Korea absent its nuclear program. The country is an impoverished wreck; its people suffer persistent malnutrition and sometimes starve, often to death. North Koreans are better at trading drugs and counterfeiting dollars than at engaging in commerce. Kim Jong-il ends up on the front pages of the world's newspapers only when he makes nuclear threats.

Third, nuclear threats are about all he has to try to extort money from his neighbors. He blusters at the South and rages against Japan. The People's Republic of China he warns of collapse and chaos, followed by reunification with America's ally, South Korea. Regional worries about an implosion of the DPRK are magnified by Pyongyang's possession of nuclear weapons.

As if the international benefits weren't obvious enough, the internal political dynamic runs strongly against genuine negotiations. With Kim Jong-il following the same "military first" policy as his father, he is an unlikely candidate for nuclear disarmament under the best of circumstances.

And the circumstances are not best, with his uncertain health and the looming leadership transition. Kim Hyun-wook, of the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, recently opined: "Now that the succession is almost completed, there is a definite mood

shift toward resuming the Six-Party Talks." However, the succession is far from complete.

Kim Jong-il has anointed his youngest son as his successor, but his father spent nearly two decades preparing Kim to rule. The new dauphin will have far less time. And there are numerous potential claimants for power in Pyongyang. Kim has two other sons, a sister and brother-in-law, a half-brother, a wife, and several (it is thought) illegitimate children. There also are numerous Korean Workers Party officials and military officers who have been waiting a long time to take charge.

Given the potentially decisive role of the military in determining who will rule after Kim's death, he is unlikely to sacrifice the armed services' most important program with his son so far from authority. Nor are his successors likely to face down the generals, especially if the regime ends up, at least at first, with some sort of collective leadership. Appeasement of the West is not likely to be the best path to victory in any internal power struggle.

While Washington and Seoul engaging in new negotiations isn't likely to hurt, it isn't likely to help either. It's hard to imagine what Presidents Obama and Lee could say to convince Kim Jong-il to toss his roughly dozen nuclear weapons, whether potential or in being, in the global trash-bin. Please show seriousness and respect and we can talk, the allies chirp. That sort of language isn't likely to persuade Kim.

A better strategy, still with minimal likelihood of success, would be for the U.S., South Korea, and Japan to develop a full package of benefits -- security, economic, diplomatic -- in return for complete denuclearization backed by intrusive inspections. The three also should consider what they would offer for eliminating the North's capability of nuclear expansion, without eliminating any existing weapons. Imperfect as this option might be, it would be a vast improvement over the status quo and has a far better (though still small) chance of acceptance than full denuclearization.

Then the allies should present the plan to the China and request Beijing's full support. That would mean more than hortatory statements. It would mean diplomatic pressure along with the threat of supporting Western sanctions and cutting off food and energy assistance. And following through, if the DPRK resisted.

In return, the allies would promise financial assistance to the PRC in the event of a North Korean collapse, with refugees flooding across the Yalu. The U.S. and South Korea also would indicate no opposition to Chinese military activities in the North in the event of a crisis in Pyongyang. And Washington and Seoul would pledge that American military forces would leave the peninsula after any reunification: there would be no U.S. troops bordering China.

If Beijing was supportive, the table would be set for potentially useful Six-Party Talks. At least there would be no more question as to whether a better or more nuanced Western approach might win results. The North would have its offer to "join the international community," as U.S. officials like to say. If Pyongyang said no, there would be no more excuses.

But if the Chinese government refused to support the allied effort, another form of clarity also would be achieved. Beijing would have sacrificed an important opportunity to play a positive leadership role in East Asia in order to profit from instability on the Korean peninsula. It would be a valuable lesson for all of the PRC's neighbors.

Moreover, in the face of Chinese recalcitrance, the Obama administration should indicate that if the North continues on its present course, that the U.S. would rethink its opposition to South Korea and Japan responding accordingly. The further spread of nuclear weapons would be a bad option, but perhaps not as bad as leaving America in the position of being expected to defend its allies against an unpredictable and reckless North Korea.

And should America's friends choose to develop arsenals also capable of hitting Beijing, well, that would not be seen as a problem in Washington. There may be worse things than Japan having nuclear weapons, such as only China possessing them, with America expected to risk Los Angeles for Tokyo.

There is no easy answer to the tragedy of North Korea. Military action risks setting off a war which would destroy Seoul, even though the allies would ultimately prevail. Economic sanctions have achieved little without Chinese support. Another round of negotiations without changed circumstances ensures more futile U.S. huffing and puffing.

Any new talks should be directed as much at Beijing as Pyongyang. It is time to share the nightmare with Chinese officials who apparently believe they can permanently benefit from the current standoff. Only when they realize that a nuclear North Korea will make them losers too is there any realistic chance of stopping the North's nuclear program.

**Doug Bandow** is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author and editor of several books, including *The Politics of Plunder: Misgovernment in Washington (Transaction)*.