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Norks & Nukes

by Ted Galen Carpenter

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Throughout the crisis that began in 2002 over North Korea's nuclear program, the dominant assumption among policy elites in the United States and East Asia was that Pyongyang was merely engaging in hard bargaining. Ultimately, so the logic went, Kim Jong-Il's regime would agree to abandon its nuclear ambitions in exchange for concessions from the other members of the six-party talks, especially the United States. Those of us who suggested that North Korea might be determined to develop and keep a nuclear arsenal, and was merely using the six-party talks to stall for time were treated as if we were guilty of bad manners for even raising the possibility.

Such smug complacency has begun to evaporate with surprising speed—and not just in the United States. When I discussed the North Korea issue with officials and policy experts in China during an April 2008 trip, only a small minority seemed worried that the six-party talks might fail. Their attitude was dramatically different during my trip in June of this year. Indeed, the pessimism about being able to stop Pyongyang through diplomacy was strong and growing.

Recent North Korean actions justify such pessimism. Since April, Pyongyang has, in rapid succession, conducted a long-range-missile test, withdrawn from the six-party talks, expelled international inspectors from the Yongbyon reactor complex and detonated an underground nuclear device. Kim's government has taken all of those steps not only in the teeth of international condemnation, but over the strenuous objections of its only serious remaining ally: China.

We have reached the point where we need to determine, once and for all, whether North Korea has any intention of abandoning its nuclear ambitions. In the diplomatic equivalent of Texas Hold 'Em poker, it is time for the United States to go "all in"—put all its chips on the table.

North Korea insists that it is pursuing a nuclear-weapons program because of Washington's "hostile policy." In other words, Pyongyang professes to fear that if it does not develop a nuclear deterrent, United States will someday use military force to achieve regime change, as it did in Iraq.

It is more likely that fear of U.S. intentions is only one reason why Pyongyang is building a nuclear arsenal. The prestige of being a member of the exclusive global nuclear-weapons club, the belief that a nuclear North Korea would be able to blackmail its nonnuclear East Asian neighbors, and the prospect of lucrative revenues from selling atomic technology or warheads to willing purchasers are probably other factors.

There is one reliable way to find out. The United States should offer a comprehensive bargain to North Korea. Washington should agree to sign a treaty formally ending the state of war on the Korean Peninsula, ink a nonaggression pact, establish diplomatic relations with Pyongyang and end all economic sanctions against the regime, except those that have direct military applications. In exchange, Washington should insist on the simultaneous implementation of a verifiable agreement (including a rigorous inspections system) to terminate North Korea's nuclear program.

Such concessions would cost the United States very little. Signing a peace treaty to end the Korean War would merely formalize the state of affairs that has existed on the ground since the signing of the armistice in 1953. Agreeing to a nonaggression pact is even less of a substantive concession. Even the most reckless American hawks hesitate about advocating an attack on North Korea to achieve

regime change—however much all of us want to see that odious system on the ash heap of history. Using military force against North Korea might well trigger a major war on the Korean Peninsula and perhaps a general war throughout East Asia. That is a risk no rational person would wish to take. So giving North Korea "security assurances" (i.e., a nonaggression pact) merely renounces an option we would not want to pursue in the first place.

Similarly, establishing diplomatic and economic relations with Pyongyang is a step the United States should have taken many years ago. Indeed, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a key component of U.S. foreign policy in the region was a proposal to Moscow and Beijing for cross recognition of the two Korean states. At the end of the cold war, Russia and China both recognized South Korea, but the United States never kept its part of the bargain by recognizing North Korea.

Diplomatic recognition does not imply moral approval of a regime. We have diplomatic relations with a good many odious, repressive governments (Saudi Arabia comes to mind). Maintaining such relations merely acknowledges that it is in our interest to deal with the country in question.

Likewise, economic ties do not imply moral approval. In North Korea's case, ending economic sanctions might also help open up that closed and bizarre country to the outside world. It is a strategy that we used with China in the 1970s—a country that had recently experienced the convulsions of the Cultural Revolution—with considerable success.

The main point of offering a comprehensive bargain, however, is to determine whether Pyongyang is bluffing in this game of high-stakes nuclear poker. If North Korea is truly developing nuclear weapons only because it fears U.S. intentions, Pyongyang should accept the proposed bargain without hesitation. Even an intrusive system of inspections should not be a barrier to such an agreement.

Conversely, if Kim's regime demands other concession or balks at the requirement for inspections, we know that there are ulterior motives. Indeed, it would then be indisputable that Pyongyang is not using its nuclear program merely as a bargaining chip but is deadly serious about becoming a member of the global nuclear-weapons club. At least we would know where we stood and could consider relevant policy options. That is far preferable to another round of fruitless talks that perpetuate ambiguity and impasse.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs, including *Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America* (2008). He is also a contributing editor to *The National Interest*.

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