

Another North Korean Diplomatic Fiasco

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The North Korean leadership's February 10, 2005 announcement that it possesses nuclear weapons and "suspends" its participation in the Six Party Talks adds up to a diplomatic blunder. Pyongyang's miscalculations, both now and last December regarding the abduction issue, have strengthened the diplomatic and strategic position of the United States and Japan. At the same time, Pyongyang has embarrassed China, South Korea and Russia and caused them to shift their diplomatic effort from making Washington more flexible to convincing Pyongyang to return to the Six Party Talks. Pyongyang has also intensified international distrust of it, particularly regarding its nuclear intentions.

Last December North Korea outraged the Japanese people and their government. First, it claimed that it had returned to Japan the remains of the abducted Japanese school girl Yokota Megumi. Then, amazingly, North Korea accused the Japanese government of falsely claiming that the remains were not those of Ms. Yokota. Understandably, this shocked and greatly angered the Japanese people.

The international community did not fully appreciate the Japanese people's frustration with North Korea until February 10, 2005. That day North Korea declared in a Foreign Ministry statement that it now possesses nuclear weapons. Also, North Korea accused the United States of having "compelled" it "to suspend" participation in the Six Party Talks, which are designed to formulate a peaceful, diplomatic end to nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea, just as it had blamed Japan last December, accused the United States for forcing it to make this decision.

Actually, North Korea's February 10 announcement weakens more than it strengthens Pyongyang's military and diplomatic position. North Korea's mishandling of the abduction issue reinforced the United States' cooperation and political support for Japan's position. Most Americans do not fully appreciate the Japanese people's feelings regarding the abduction issue. But North Korea's abuse of the Japanese people's trust and good will captured the attention of America's political and governmental leadership - from the White and Foggy Bottom to Capital Hill. The United States now stands resolutely behind Japan's demands that North Korea take all appropriate steps to assuage the Japanese people's concerns regarding the abduction issue.

No longer can anyone claim that the United States intelligence community's belief that North Korea has nuclear weapons is based on unreliable intelligence. North Korea itself has now declared that it has "manufactured nuclear weapons for self-defense." Regardless of the excuse, North Korea's admission strengthens the strategic and political

justification for the US-Japan alliance. It also confirms the need for the United States to maintain its nuclear umbrella over Japan and to continue joint development of an anti-ballistic missile system.

North Korea's announcement also further strengthens the international community's understanding and support for Prime Minister Koizumi's decision to block the entry of North Korean ships into Japanese harbors without required safety equipment and insurance. This is certain to have a significant negative impact on North Korea's export of fish to Japan.

North Korea has also profoundly weakened its diplomatic position regarding its other neighbors. Until the February 10 announcement, China and South Korea concentrated their diplomatic efforts on pressing Washington to demonstrate greater flexibility toward Pyongyang. North Korea's announcement deflects this diplomatic pressure back onto Pyongyang. Embarrassed, frustrated and angry, Beijing, Seoul and Moscow must now compel North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks. At the same time, they cannot help but share Washington and Tokyo's distrust of Pyongyang.

Finally, Pyongyang's blunders have linked its survival to whether or not it returns to the Six Party Talks. If Pyongyang refuses to return to the talks, Beijing and Seoul will eventually be convinced to end their extensive economic assistance to Pyongyang. Without such help, the Kim Jong Il regime cannot survive very long. Kim Jong Il's determination to perpetuate his regime, and his dependence on aid from China and South Korea, more than anything else, are most likely to convince North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks.

The Six Party Talks, in other words, are working. They are preventing Pyongyang and Washington from resolving their differences using military means. Instead, all the parties continue to concentrate on diplomacy. Diplomatic pressure from Beijing and Seoul has convinced Washington to adjust its position. The Bush Administration is now willing to engage North Korea in bilateral dialogue under the umbrella of the Six Party Talks. Also, Washington has shelved its "military option." Pyongyang must now adjust its position. Ultimately, Pyongyang must learn that its coercive diplomacy will not achieve its national goal of survival. To achieve that goal, it must return to the Six Party Talks and begin to cooperate with the international community.