

North Korea's Plutonium Diplomacy

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North Korean leader Kim Jong Il is painting himself into a corner. Late last year he launched a campaign of “smile diplomacy.” When this fell short of his goal, he reverted in early April to “plutonium diplomacy.” Kim’s apparent aim is to focus international pressure on Washington to compel it to give him a face saving path back to the Six Party Talks. But Washington has reacted with calm intransigence. Consequently, tensions continue to escalate and prospects for resumption of the Six Party Talks remain uncertain.

Since last fall, Kim Jong Il has been trying to compel Washington to give him “face saving” way back to the Six Party Talks. He first tried “smile diplomacy.” His number two man and former Foreign Minister Kim Yong-nam met two visiting U.S Congressional delegations in Pyongyang. He told them that North Korea would return to the talks if “the US did not appear or act in a belligerent manner” But on January 18, Secretary of State Rice enraged Pyongyang at her confirmation hearing when she labeled North Korea an “outpost of tyranny.” Thus ended smile diplomacy.

Kim Jong Il then abruptly shifted to “plutonium diplomacy.” On February 10, his Foreign Ministry declared that North Korea now possesses a nuclear arsenal. A few days later, North Korea asserted its right to end a five year voluntary moratorium on the testing of ballistic missiles. The inference was clear. North Korea would work to wed its nuclear bombs to its ballistic missiles.

The Bush Administration’s has consistently responded, “So what?” President Bush, staunchly backed by his closest foreign policy advisers Vice President Cheney and State and Defense Secretaries Rice and Rumsfeld, has calmly cautioned that the time may be approaching to consider other options. While intentionally leaving ambiguous the meaning of other options, the Bush Administration has made known its willingness to refer the “North Korean nuclear issue” to the UN Security Council and has not ruled out its “military option.”

But Pyongyang is not yet willing to back down. Its response has been more “plutonium diplomacy.” In early April, Kim Yong-nam met his long time American associate Selig Harrison to Pyongyang. Mr. Harrison, a retired journalist, has been visiting North Korea for thirty years. Kim Yong-nam knows that Mr. Harrison will tell the international press about their discussions. (Kim Jong Il seems to be following his father Kim Il Sung’s practice of broadcasting his views to the international press during interviews with

selected journalists from Japan and Italy.) When they met on April 7, Kim Yong-nam told Harrison his nation still hopes to return to the Six Party Talks, but the Bush Administration should first demonstrate a less hostile attitude toward it. Otherwise, Kim reportedly cautioned, Pyongyang would continue to reinforce its nuclear deterrence capability. Mr. Harrison promptly spread the word about his meeting with Kim Yong-nam.

The next day, April 8, North Korea's official news service reported that the Korean People's Army Chief of the General Staff, Kim Yong-chun, on the 12th anniversary of Kim Jong Il's election as chairman of the National Defense Council (NDC), the most powerful agency of North Korea's government, declared:

The U.S. persistent hostile policy toward the DPRK will only prompt Pyongyang to further consolidate the single minded unity of its revolutionary ranks and bolster its self-defensive nuclear deterrent ...

A few days later, Pyongyang shut down its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center, exciting speculation in the international press that North Korea might be making more plutonium for more nuclear bombs. The White House responded calmly but resolutely. Its spokesman commented, "Well, if North Korea refuses to come back to the six-party talks, then I fully expect we would consult with our partners in the region about the next steps, and that 's (taking the issue to the UN Security Council) certainly one possibility."

Kim Jong Il's "plutonium diplomacy," like his "smile diplomacy," has fallen short of his goals. Washington still refuses to give him a face saving way back to the Six Party Talks. Kim's target is Washington, but his aim is to convince other nations to pressure the Bush Administration to demonstrate greater flexibility and less hostility toward Pyongyang. This suggests the possibility that current "plutonium diplomacy" may be timed to coincide with Secretary Rice's April 19-20 meeting with Russian President Putin in Moscow and meeting with NATO foreign ministers.

Kim Jong Il does not seem intent upon a confrontation with the United States, but his coercive "plutonium diplomacy" could be setting the stage for one. He has strengthened the hand of "hardliners" liners in the Bush Administration while weakening the influence of moderates who advocate direct bilateral diplomatic dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang. Ultimately, Kim Jong Il is putting himself into a position of either returning to the Six Party Talks or confronting the United States. Either way, the escalation of tensions will make forging a peaceful diplomatic increasingly difficult while also increasing the risk of a confrontation.