

North Korea New Strategy for 2009 - First Build Nuclear Weapons, Then Negotiate

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North Korea's Dual Strategy

North Korea since 1989 has alternated between two polarities in its foreign and security policies. At times, it has seemed determined to discard its isolation and distrust of the outside world in favor of pursuing diplomatic and commercial engagement of the international community. Political talks with Tokyo in 1989 initiated a hopeful process that paralleled the intensification of dialogue with South Korea. Eventually talks with Japan stalled but considerable progress was achieved with South Korea. Washington-Pyongyang dialogue soon followed. North Korea entered the United Nations, ratified a nuclear safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency and initiated implementation of several reconciliation programs with South Korea. All of this ended abruptly with the revelation that North Korea had misled the IAEA about the amount of plutonium it had previously produced.

In 1994, Pyongyang alternated between cooperation and confrontation with Washington. After the United States initiated preparations for war with North Korea, North Korea's aging leader Kim Il Sung agreed to return to the negotiating table. Again, Pyongyang seemed eager to end its nuclear weapons program and eventually even the development of its ballistic missile program in favor of normalizing diplomatic and commercial relations with the United States.

But once again North Korea reversed course. According to reliable United States intelligence, North Korea in 2000 initiated a clandestine nuclear program that disregarded commitments it had made to South Korea in their 1991 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula while also breaking promises to the United States to "freeze" all its nuclear activities.

Pyongyang has repeated similar cycles of vacillation during the Six Party Talks between 2003 and 2008. These cycles suggest that North Korea's leadership either is unwilling or unable to resolve a continuing dispute within the North Korean government.

Past conduct suggests two schools of thought have been dueling since at least 1989 over how best to promote North Korea's national security, economic development and independence. One school seems to favor a strategy that promotes national interests through negotiations. The other school seems equally adamant in its avocation that the national interests are best served by first developing a nuclear weapons "deterrent capability." If accurate, this could explain Pyongyang's vacillation during the past two decades.

As of early 2009, however, Pyongyang appears to have resolved its dilemma in favor of first building a formidable nuclear and ballistic missile arsenal to ensure its national security (in Pyongyang the preferred word is “sovereignty”) prior to pursuing its national interest through negotiations and cooperation with the international.

This assessment is reviewed below in the historical context of US-DPRK negotiations and North Korea’s actions since 1993.

North Korea’s Decision to Build a Nuclear Arsenal

We cannot know precisely the reasons behind the decisions that Pyongyang’s leadership makes, but a review of North Korea’s recent conduct combined with a careful reading of its official policy statements does give us considerable insight into reasons for North Korea’s actions.

The risk of war on the Korean Peninsula persists except now another Korean War could escalate into a nuclear war because North Korea has nuclear weapons and continues to improve its ballistic missile capability. North Korea appears to have chosen to build a nuclear arsenal because:

- The military balance of power on the Korean Peninsula shifted in South Korea’s favor when the Soviet Union collapsed. This ended the Soviet nuclear umbrella over North Korea but the United States has continued to provide a nuclear umbrella over South Korea.
- The United States’ quick destruction of Iraq’s Soviet designed military equipment during the 1991 Persian Gulf War convinced North Korea’s military leaders that it needed to take quick action to restore the military balance of power on the Korean Peninsula. Modernizing North Korea’s military equipment would have been too costly because Moscow’s new government refused to provide military assistance to Pyongyang. Also the North Korean economy was in decline so North Korea decided the most effective, quickest, and least costly way to restore the military balance of power was for North Korea to develop its own nuclear weapons capability.
- North Korea’s ballistic missile development serves two needs: 1. it develops a nuclear weapon delivering system that can strike Japan, particularly US military bases there, and 2. it earns hard currency by exporting missiles and uses this money to purchase nuclear and ballistic missile technology and equipment.
- North Korea remains convinced that it needs a “nuclear deterrent capability” because of what it calls the United States’ “hostile policy” toward it.

Further reinforcing North Korea’s commitment to building a nuclear is its perception that the balance of power in Northeast Asia now heavily favors South Korea. China and Russia ended their Cold War military support for North Korea by 1992. Not only has Russia ended its nuclear umbrella and weakened its commitment to defend North Korea from attack by revising the DPRK-Russia Defense Treaty, but Moscow now requires that Pyongyang pay cash first for any military equipment it wishes to acquire from Russia.

Equally important is the fact that Beijing and Moscow, once Pyongyang's primary allies, now has diplomatic and commercial relations with its long time nemesis Seoul.

South Korea's prosperity, generated by a dynamic economy with access to the international market and advanced technology, has the money and technological skills needed to improve its military arsenal both quantitatively and qualitatively. Also, although the number of US troops in South Korea has declined in recent years, the United States maintains a potent air and navy military force in South Korea and Japan, and shares its advanced military technology by allowing South Korea to co-produce selected weapons systems. At the same time, the United States and Japan have yet to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with North Korea because of Pyongyang's determined ambition to develop its own nuclear arsenal.

South Korea's President Labeled a "Traitor" and "US Puppet"

North Korea has determined that South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, who assumed office in February 2008, has restored policies that North Korea considers "hostile." Lee's predecessors Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun had pursued successful engagement policies toward North Korea that greatly reduced tensions on the Korean Peninsula, forged two joint South-North agreements as well as established several joint economic projects. But President Lee has rejected the June 15, 2000 and October 2007 South-North Joint statements. He has also pressed Pyongyang to quicken the pace of its promised dismantlement of nuclear weapons and to improve the human rights situation in North Korea. Further complicating South-North relations was the shooting of a South Korean tourist in 2008 while on a tour of the Kumgang Mount Resort area of North Korea. In response to President Lee's reversion to a relatively confrontation posture toward Pyongyang, North Korea has labeled him a "traitor" and "puppet" of the United States as well as discontinued most joint South-North projects.

North Korea's Definition of "US Hostile Policy"

Against this backdrop, North Korea remains convinced that the United States is pursuing a "hostile policy" toward it. American negotiators first heard the words "US hostile policy" when they sat down for their first diplomatic negotiations with North Korea in New York in June 1993. Chief DPRK delegate Kang Sok-ju, first vice minister of Foreign Affairs, initiated the negotiations by reading a statement that claimed the source of the "nuclear issue" was the "US hostile policy" toward North Korea. That claim persists.

The essence of "hostile policy" is that the United States is striving to "strangle North Korea," i.e. destroy it as an independent, sovereign political entity. According to Pyongyang, the effort dates from the Korean War when the United States convinced the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to label North Korea an international outlaw and an aggressor. A strategy of "containment" was applied to North Korea that included excluding it from membership in international organizations and extensive economic sanctions.

Reinforcing “containment” was the United States’ military strategies of collective security and deterrence. The United States signed separate defense treaties with South Korea and Japan. These allowed the United States to forward deploy tens of thousands of US army, navy and air force personnel and their equipment in South Korea and Japan to deter another North Korean attack on South Korea and to defend South Korea if such an attack occurred.

The Bush Doctrine

North Korea claims that the United States’ maintenance of this Cold War defense arrangement, combined with President George W. Bush’s December 2002 declaration of a doctrine of “pre-emptive nuclear strike” (so-called Bush doctrine) require that North Korea develop and maintain nuclear weapons to “deter” a nuclear attack by the United States.

During the decade from 1992 and 2002, North Korea concentrated on pursuing dismantlement of the “hostile policy” through negotiations, first with the United States, then with South Korea and finally in 2002 with Japan. But President Bush’s December 2002 declaration of a “pre-emptive nuclear strike” doctrine followed by his January 2003 “axis of evil” speech escalated North Korea’s concerns. The “axis of evil” comments concerned Pyongyang because President Bush identified North Korea as one of three potential targets of his “pre-emptive doctrine.” This concern was further intensified when the United States invaded Iraq in April 2003 to prevent it from developing a nuclear arsenal. North Korea believed it was next on Bush’s “axis of evil” list.

Six Party Talks

One consequence of this invasion was North Korea’s decision to develop nuclear weapons in tandem with continuing negotiations. China’s hosting of the Six Party Talks, which began in August 2003, sustained North Korea’s willingness to pursue a dual strategy of negotiations first with the development of nuclear weapons as a secondary goal. But before it would return to the Six Party Talks, North Korea insisted that President Bush cease his derogatory remarks about North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. In Pyongyang these remarks came to symbolize the United States’ hostile policy. Only after Bush reluctantly restrained himself did North Korea return to the Six Party Talks.

The Six Party Talks’ September 2005 accord aroused hopes that negotiations might achieve results, but within a matter of days, the United States imposed financial sanctions on North Korea, froze some of its financial assets in a Macao bank and blocked Pyongyang’s ability to engage in international commerce. Pyongyang’s leadership saw these measures as a manifestation of the United States’ hostile policy. At the same time, it apparently convinced some of North Korea’s most powerful political figures, i.e. generals of the Korean People’s Army (KPA), that the United States could not be trusted. Within a year, North Korea exploded its first nuclear weapon in October 2006.

Another year of intense diplomacy by China, Russia, the United States and South Korea convinced North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks in 2007. Central to this was the United States promise to phase out its “Trading With the Enemy Act” (TWEA) sanctions first imposed on North Korea in 1950 and remove North Korea from the United States’ so-called “terrorism list.” By making such a promise, then US chief delegate to the Six Party Talks Ambassador Christopher Hill hoped his promise to North Korea would quicken progress toward resolution of the nuclear issue. Actually Hill had put himself into a position that enabled Pyongyang to manipulate him against Japan. Hill had made the promise to North Korea without consulting Japan. Japan felt betrayed because it wished to intensify sanctions as a method to compel North Korea to satisfy Japan’s concerns regarding the abducted Japanese previously taken by North Korea.

President Bush hesitantly complied with Hill’s promise and late in 2008 authorized an end to TWEA sanctions and the dropping of North Korea from the “terrorism list,” despite Japan keen opposition to this later step.

Nevertheless, North Korea again blocked further progress toward a resolution by refusing to submit to “international standards” and “sample collection,” a fundamental step in the verification process that a nation does not possess and is not making nuclear weapons. Despite five and one half years of intense diplomacy, North Korea in 2009 has continued its nuclear weapons program and continues to claim that it will not dismantle this until the United States ends its “hostile policy.”

North Korea’s New Price for Cooperation

A fundamental characteristic of North Korea’s negotiating tactics is to increase the price it demands for an agreement the longer it takes the other side to accept Pyongyang’s priority demands. During the 1990s, Pyongyang was willing to make a deal (the so-called Agreed Framework) if the United States lifted some sanctions, ended the annual joint US-South Korea military exercise “Team Spirit,” and supplied 500,000 metric tons of heavy fuel oil (HFO) until construction of two light water reactors (LWR) had been completed. In exchange, North Korea “froze” its nuclear development program, remained a member of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), agreed to respect the South-North Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as well as cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and to re-engage South Korea in dialogue.

By 2007, North Korea’s demands for ending its nuclear weapons program had increased significantly and include:

- end all economic sanctions on the DPRK,
- recognize North Korea as a “nuclear state,”
- build the DPRK two light water reactors (LWR)
- supply HFO (as promised in the September 2005 Six Party Talks Accord)
- provide other economic assistance (September 2005 Accord)
- sign a peace treaty,
- disband the United Nations Command,

- withdraw US military forces from South Korea
- joint verification that there are no nuclear weapons in either half of the Korean Peninsula,
- normalize diplomatic and commercial relations,
- access to the US market for DPRK goods.

Major Shift in Pyongyang's Strategy

At the beginning of 2009, North Korea appears to have made a major adjustment in its strategy for dealing with the United States, Japan and South Korea. In the 1990s, it emphasized achieving its goals by pursuing negotiations, primarily with the United States but also with South Korea and Japan, its former allies Russia and China, as well as the European Union and other nations. But between 2002 and 2008 North Korea resumed its nuclear weapons program but continued its participation in the Six Party Talks and in bilateral talks with the United States.

Now, as of May 2009, North Korea appears to have assigned top priority to building its “nuclear deterrent capability” before resuming any negotiations. The Foreign Ministry on March 24 issued a statement prior to its April 5 launching of a long range ballistic missile in which it declared, “The six-party talks are now on the verge of collapse due to Japan’s non-fulfillment of its commitment, an intention to delay the denuclearization of the peninsula in a bid to find a pretext for going nuclear.” (“Spokesman for DPRK Foreign Ministry Slams Anti-DPRK Campaign over Its Projected Satellite Launch,” March 24, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp). The statement warns, “*If it is impossible to put an end to the hostile relations through dialogue, then there is no other option but to bolster up the muscle to deter the hostile acts.*” In other words, not having been able to achieve its national goals via negotiations, North Korea has decided it will first strengthen its military capability, including nuclear “deterrent capability” so if it decides to resume negotiations, it will be able to negotiate from a position of strength.

Before releasing this statement, the DPRK Foreign Ministry began issuing statements that significantly stiffened Pyongyang’s negotiating stance and demands for a deal. On January 13, 2009 the DPRK Foreign Ministry (“DPRK Foreign Ministry’s Spokesman Dismisses U.S. Wrong Assertion,” January 13, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp) asserted that it had “consented to the September 19 (2005) Joint Statement” of the Six Party Talks to achieve the,

denuclearize not only the northern half of the Korean Peninsula but the whole of it, and to this end, the United States committed itself to terminate its hostile relations with the DPRK, assure it of non-use of nuclear weapons and clear south Korea of nukes, etc.”

The statement makes it very clear that Pyongyang’s goal in future negotiations is “simultaneous nuclear disarmament” in both halves of the Korean Peninsula, a position not previously asserted so strongly.

The price for “simultaneous nuclear disarmament” was raised, as clarified in the Foreign Ministry’s statement on January 17 (“DPRK Foreign Ministry’s Spokesman Dismisses U.S. Wrong Assertion,” January 17, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp). This statement claimed that, “U.S. is miscalculating if it considers the normalization of the DPRK-U.S. relations as a reward for the DPRK’s nuclear abandonment,” and goes on to concluded, “Though the (US-DPRK) bilateral relations are normalized in a diplomatic manner, the DPRK’s status as a nuclear weapons state will remain unchanged as long as it is exposed even to the slightest U.S. nuclear threat.” Obviously North Korea continues to raise the price of its ending its nuclear weapons program.

Equally surprising has been the increasing visibility of the General Staff of the Korean People’s Army (KPA) and its involvement in North Korea’s policy decisions. Normally only the KPA Mission at Panmunjom (formerly the North Korean representatives to the Korean War Military Armistice Commission) issues policy statements. These statements usually express objections regarding US-ROK joint military exercises and related developments. Also in recent years DPRK military representatives to the South-North Military Talks have occasionally issued statements regarding the these talks.

The KPA’s General Staff usually remained silent, but on February 2, 2009 it shattered this silence. That day a “spokesman for the General Staff” issued a statement that began (“DPRK’s Principled Stand on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula Reiterated,” February 2, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp),

It is the unshakable stand already clarified by the DPRK that it will never show its nuclear weapons unless the U.S. rolls back its hostile policy toward the DPRK and the latter is completely free from the former’s (*sic*) nuclear threat, ...”

The KPA spokesman added, “The DPRK will never ‘dismantle its nuclear weapons’ unless nukes in south Korea are dismantled to remove the nuclear threat from the U.S.” Such statements greatly increase the price North Korea expects to extract from the United States and South Korea in exchange for dismantling its nuclear weapons arsenal.

These uncharacteristic public issuances of statements by the KPA General Staff has continued. On February 19, the General Staff’s spokesman declared that, “...the Korean People’s Army is fully ready for an all-out confrontation ...” (“KPA Ready for All-out Confrontation, February 19, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp). Again on March 9, 2009, the KPA’s Supreme Command issued a report (“KPA Supreme Command Orders All Its Service Persons to be Fully Combat Ready,” March 9, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp) that stated it had ordered ,

... all the service persons to be fully combat ready and follow every move of the aggressors with vigilance in view of the grave situation prevailing in the country and deal merciless retaliatory blows at tem should they intrude into the sky and land and seas of the DPRK even an inch.

The immediate reason for the “report’s” issuance was the commencement of joint US-ROK military exercises on March 9. In previous years, only the Foreign Ministry and the

KPA's Panmunjom Mission has issued such statements. But the report ends with the perplexing sentence, "War maniacs should be dealt with arms, not with words." This suggests that the KPA differs with the Foreign Ministry's preference to engage the United States and other nations in diplomatic negotiations. For the KPA, its preference is to strengthen North Korea's military might rather than negotiation an end to its nuclear arsenal.

North Korea predictably reacted very negatively to the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) issuance of a President's Statement that condemned Pyongyang's April 5 launching of a long range ballistic missile. The Foreign Ministry on April 14 (DPRK Foreign Ministry Vehemently Refutes UNSC's "Presidential Statement," April 14, 2009, www.KCNA.co.jp) labeled the statement "brigandish" and proclaimed that "The UNSC's action was wanton violation of international law ..." "There arises a question as to whether the UN is necessary for the DPRK as it infringes upon the sovereignty of its member nation," the statement continued. The Foreign Ministry then declared that "there is no need any more to have the six-party talks ..." and that "The six-party talks have lost the meaning of their existence never to recover now ..." Increasingly assertive, the statement claims that, "The DPRK will never participate in such six-party talks nor will it be bound any longer to any agreement of the talks ..."

Equally worrisome is that the April 14 statement claims that "the DPRK will boost its nuclear deterrent for self-defence in every way, and will "... restore ... the nuclear facilities which had been disabled."

Four days later a spokesman of the KPA's General Staff in yet another abnormal statement issued on April 18 blamed the "group of traitors" in South Korea and the "U.S. and Japanese aggressors" for the worsening situation. The KPA went so far as to proclaim that, "The army of the DPRK has never pinned any hope on the six-party talks from the outset ..."

Subsequent DPRK official statements announced that North Korea had resumed the reprocessing of nuclear spent fuel to produce plutonium for more nuclear weapons (April 24). Then on April 29, the Foreign Ministry stated that unless the UNSC retracted its statement and apologized, North Korea "... will be compelled to take additional self-defensive measure ..." that will "include nuclear tests and test-firings of intercontinental ballistic missiles."

No Way Out?

The Foreign Ministry and Korean People's Army public utterances in March and April paint North Korea into a corner. Its leadership will now feel compelled to convert their rhetoric into action. At least one more nuclear test and one or more ballistic missile tests are certain to take place in the near future.

Then, depending on the reaction of the United States, Japan and South Korea to these tests, North Korea might consider eventually returning to the Six Party Talks. If these

nations again press the UNSC to issue more statements or authorize more economic sanctions, Pyongyang's "hard liners," i.e. its top ranking military generals will strongly oppose a return to negotiations arguing that North Korea must first take steps to strengthen its "nuclear deterrent capability."

Most importantly, Supreme Commander Kim Jong Il appears inclined to support his generals over his diplomats, at least in the near term. He cannot reject his generals' demands in the face of international pressure. Kim's generals would view this as weakness on his part, almost a betrayal of North Korea's sovereignty.

For Kim Jong Il, there is an equally pressing priority – the naming of his successor. He appears inclined to promote one of his sons as his successor. But to ensure that his generals accept his preferred successor, he must win their concurrence. Kim Jong Il can best achieve this by appeasing the generals. If accurate, this assessment would help explain why since early 2009 Kim has allowed the KPA to issue its own policy statements. It could also explain why Kim first marginalized the 2005 and 2007 Six Party Talks' agreements at the end of 2008, rejected dialogue with the Obama Administration in February and March, sanctioned the April 5 missile test and now favors his generals' preference to first strengthen North Korea's "nuclear deterrent capability" and then possibly return to the Six Party Talks.

Now the best tactic for the United States, Japan and South Korea would appear to be one of closely but silently watching North Korea while working intensely to build a consensus among the three allies regarding future tactics if and when North Korea returns to the Six Party Talks. Undoubtedly Tokyo and Seoul must reconsider the extent to which their current "hard line" approach to North Korea is likely to yield any benefit or progress toward a negotiated end to North Korea's nuclear program.

China and Russia can help restrain North Korea and quietly but firmly nudge it toward returning to the Six Party Talks. But given Kim Jong Il's apparent desire to avoid any appearance of bowing to international pressure, Beijing and Moscow appear wise to favor offering Kim Jong Il inducements rather than attempting to use coercive measures to convince him to resume negotiations.

Meanwhile, the United States is wise to keep open the door for possible bilateral dialogue with North Korea's foreign ministry. This too could prove a valuable channel for convincing North Korea that it has more to gain from returning to the Six Party Talks than from building more nuclear weapons.