

**Pyongyang's Options and Washington's
Lack of Leadership**

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The mid-July United Nations Security Council resolution confronted North Korea's leadership with a precise dilemma. Pyongyang could respond constructively to the international community's concerns by halting its development of weapons of mass destruction, or it would risk diplomatic isolation and intensified economic hardship by continuing to strengthen its "nuclear deterrence capability." Either way, Pyongyang's decision will profoundly affect the future of Northeast Asia and the roles of the United States and China in the region.

Pyongyang's positive response would reap this impoverished nation multiple diplomatic and economic benefits. But first it would have to return to the Six Party Talks, and then agree to end its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. These steps would open the door to eventual normalization of diplomatic and commercial relations with the United States and Japan, Pyongyang's long time goal. International respect and prosperity could then follow. Simultaneously, prospects for peace, continuing prosperity and stability in Northeast Asia would greatly improve.

Unfortunately, the UN resolution thus far only appears to have intensified the "zero sum" game that Washington and Pyongyang have played since the Six Party Talks stalled late in 2005. Pyongyang continues to reject Beijing and Seoul's diplomatic overtures and economic inducements to return to the Six Party Talks while adamantly insisting that first the United States unfreeze its financial assets. Clearly, Pyongyang's preoccupation is to secure its national defense first, then to pursue prosperity and international respect. This became evident when North Korea ignored the international community's concerns in early July and launched multiple ballistic missiles.

But Washington remains equally adamant in its pursuing a strategy of escalating economic and diplomatic pressure to compel Pyongyang's return to the Six Party Talks. This strategy thus far has only further eroded prospects for a peaceful end to North Korea's nuclear ambitions by giving Pyongyang an excuse not to return to the talks. Meanwhile, Washington's brinkmanship continues to escalate the risk of a second Korean War.

Pyongyang's recent rhetoric suggests that its leadership's preferred option is to strengthen North Korea's nuclear deterrence capability. North Korea on July 4, 2006 convincingly demonstrated its ability to strike any US military base and other targets in South Korea and Japan with conventionally armed ballistic missiles. Its long range ballistic missile capability, the *Taepodo II*, remains unreliable, but continuing development is certain.

More worrisome is the possibility that North Korea might test a nuclear weapon. Speculation about this is not new, and no compelling evidence has been released by the concerned governments to support this speculation, but the possibility of a test cannot be rejected entirely. Experts generally agree that North Korea could test its nuclear weapon by conducting a "Pakistani" type test. To avoid the spread of radio active fallout from its nuclear tests, Pakistan drilled tunnels deep into the side of jagged mountain peaks, placed a nuclear bomb inside the mountain and sealed the tunnel with concrete. The explosion rocked the mountain, but no radio active material was projected into the atmosphere.

A North Korean nuclear test would be a major escalation of tension in Northeast Asia. It would confront the international community with a dilemma: either press North Korea to the brink of a second Korean War to give up its nuclear programs, or pressure the United States to engage North Korea in diplomatic negotiations. The Bush Administration and Japan would be prone to intensify economic pressure on North Korea, including a call for United Nations economic sanctions, something North Korea has long said it would consider an "act of war." China and Russia would be hard pressed to block such an initiative given their long standing commitment to keep the Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons. At the same time, Japan would have to choose between continuing to rely on the United States as its principle defender, or break out of the restraints imposed by the US-Japan alliance and develop its own "pre-emptive" defense capability, sometime Foreign Minister Aso urged shortly after North Korea's July 2006 missile demonstration.

The Bush Administration's strategy of "no bilateral talks except under the umbrella of the Six Party Talks" clearly has accomplished nothing constructive. If anything, it continues to allow Pyongyang the initiative to pursue its preferred option – building a nuclear deterrence capability. While Washington focuses on restarting the Six Party Talks according to its requirements, Pyongyang concentrates on building nuclear armed ballistic missiles.

Reason would suggest that the smart course of action would be for Washington to reorder its priorities. Washington would do well to admit failure in its efforts to diplomatically humiliate and isolate Pyongyang, and to force its submission using economic pressure. The Bush Administration should recognize that North Korea's illegal commercial activities and disregard for human rights do not threaten peace and stability in Northeast Asia. .

If the Bush Administration wishes to sustain United States' leadership in Northeast Asia, it must take steps to address its allies Japan and South Korea's primary concerns – their

national security in the face of North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear weapons capabilities. Washington should admit failure of its preferred strategies of threatening North Korea with a "pre-emptive" military option and imposition of more economic sanctions. It should seize the initiative by dropping the moralistic claim that North Korea should not be "rewarded" for its past misdeeds. Instead, Washington needs to put its own and its allies' national defense before President Bush's moralistic preoccupation.

Engaging North Korea in diplomatic dialogue and shelving economic sanctions to restart the Six Party Talks process are a small price to pay to halt the dangerous escalation of tensions Northeast Asia has endured since the Six Party Talks ended last fall. Washington's actions alone will not resolve the crisis, but at least it could demonstrate leadership by taking steps that will shift the emphasis away from confrontation and back to pursuing a peaceful resolution through diplomatic negotiation. This is, after all, exactly what President Bush claimed has been his primary goal regarding North Korea.