

Solving the North Korea Nuclear Problem

By
C. Kenneth Quinones, Ph.D.
Akita International University

For
Mainichi shimbun
October 2006

The new reality of a nuclear armed North Korea now confronts the international community. Discussions about whether the test was successful or not, its magnitude and future tests are of marginal significance. Politicians and historians will long argue whether the Bush Administration's nuclear non-proliferation strategy failed or China and South Korea undercut Washington's efforts. But our priority concern must remain how to peacefully achieve a nuclear free Korean Peninsula.

The balance of power in Northeast Asia is changing. After Japan's surrender in 1945, the United States emerged as the supreme power, but the situation has changed since 1990. The Soviet Union collapsed, ending its challenge to U.S. power. China's political stability and prosperity subsequently enabled it to assert its diplomatic and economic influence in the region. South Korea first engaged China diplomatically and economically, and then embraced North Korea with "sunshine diplomacy." Now North Korea has demonstrated its "nuclear deterrence capability."

Today, the United States' power is no longer unrivaled. Washington's ability to influence the policies of Japan and South Korea continues to decline. Tokyo and Seoul's prosperity and market "globalization" allow then increasing independence from the United States. China has replaced the United States as South Korea's foremost trading partner. Also US military supremacy has declined. Japan and South Korea, at the United States' urging, have developed sophisticated arsenals while the Bush Administration's "war on terrorism" has concentrated US military forces in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, North Korea has estranged itself from the international community. In July 2006, it outraged even China by ending its self-imposed moratorium on ballistic missile tests. Its first nuclear test forged an unprecedented consensus in the UN Security Council that facilitated passage of strident sanctions against North Korea. In response, North Korea has declared the UN sanctions to be an "act of war."

This context limits our options for dealing with North Korea: war, regime change or negotiation. We would do well to select an option that will achieve maximum gains toward our goal with minimal cost to us.

War: the United States and its allies Japan and South Korea could quickly defeat North Korea. The cost of war, however, would be unacceptable to the people of these nations. It could also escalate into a nuclear confrontation between the United States and China.

If war erupted in Northeast Asia, the United States would bombard North Korea with hundreds of missiles launched from nuclear submarines while hundreds of planes flying from Guam, Japan and South Korea would rain thousands of bombs on North Korea. Pyongyang would bombard US military bases in Japan and South Korea with hundreds of conventionally armed ballistic missiles. The South and North Korean armies would collide as US marines from Okinawa landed on North Korea's east coast. North Korea would be defeated quickly, but the cost would be enormous. Tens of thousands of Koreans and Japanese would die along with a much smaller number of Americans. The international economy would be severely disrupted as North Korean missiles fell on Tokyo, Osaka, Seoul and Pusan. Similarly, the cost of rebuilding would be enormous. President Bush, despite his earlier declaration of possessing a "pre-emptive counter proliferation strategy," has recently ruled out any attack on North Korea. The cost of war makes it the least preferable option for dealing with North Korea.

Regime Change: We could replace Kim Jong Il as North Korea's ruler with someone more likely to pursue policies acceptable to the international community. This could be done by either: compelling North Korea's economic collapse using sanctions or use military force as the United States did to destroy the Saddam Hussein regime. The Bush and Abe Administrations are using United Nations and unilateral sanctions to first punish Pyongyang for its provocative conduct. Ultimately, they could use these sanctions to force Kim Jong Il either to return to the negotiating table or to see his regime collapse. The effectiveness of this effort, however, is blunted by the more moderate positions of China, Russia and South Korea. They also want North Korea to return to the negotiating table, but wish to avoid the risks entailed by Kim Jong Il's removal from power. Regime change encompasses the possibility of internal strife and even civil war, as we have witnessed in Iraq. Such developments could require very costly international intervention and would not necessarily produce a stable nuclear free Korean Peninsula.

Negotiations: Finally, we could engage North Korea in diplomatic negotiations. The preferred forum is the Chinese-hosted Six Party Talks. North Korea continues to proclaim its willingness to return to these talks but only if the United States: ends its financial sanctions and re-opens the so-called "New York channel" between the US State Department and the North Korean mission to the United Nations in New York. President Bush, however, remains resolutely opposed to accommodating Pyongyang's demands. China, Russia and South Korea, however, prefer that the United States demonstrate greater flexibility toward North Korea. Ultimately, negotiations present the least costly option for us to pursue. But before negotiations become a realistic possibility, both Pyongyang and Washington will have to take steps they thus far have refused to take.

Ultimately, the choice of options is ours to make. The wisest course would appear to be to pursue the option that would cost us the least suffering and damage while most likely to accomplish the international community's goal: a peaceful end to North Korea's nuclear program. The longer we wait to negotiate with North Korea, the greater will be the cost to us. Also, refusing to negotiate will allow North Korea to continue its efforts to put a nuclear bomb on top of a ballistic missile. Once that happens, it may be too late to achieve a peaceful end to North Korea's nuclear ambitions.