

Resolving the Korean Nuclear Problem

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North Korea no longer can claim exclusive ownership of the nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula. It now shares that distinction with South Korea after the latter admitted having violated the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and prior promises to the United States. But the world cannot continue to ignore the fact that both Koreas harbor nuclear ambitions for similar reasons. Recognition of this could be the starting point for resolution of the Korean nuclear problem.

The Seoul and Washington governments moved quickly to minimize the “fallout” from Seoul’s admission by issuing reassuring press guidance. They labeled the 2000 incident an “unauthorized experiment” that yielded a “trace” of enriched uranium, something useful only in a nuclear weapon. A few days later, they confirmed another incident in the early 1980s which they admitted also involved another “small experiment” that yielded another trace of plutonium, again useful only in a nuclear weapon. Also mentioned was South Korea’s 1979 decision to halt its nuclear weapons development program, a decision made under concerted US pressure.

South Korea and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are to be commended for their handling of the situation thus far. Seoul has publicly admitted its past misdeeds and promised to facilitate full IAEA investigation. The IAEA has acted promptly according to NPT protocols and will report its findings to the UN Security Council.

Alas, these steps will not resolve the fundamental problem – damage to South Korea’s credibility. North Korea is certain to press the issue for maximum gain. It has already rattled international confidence regarding future participation in the Six Party Talks which are aimed at dismantling its “nuclear deterrence capability.” South Korea’s confession has handed Pyongyang what it has sought since the talks began – a way out. But Pyongyang’s diplomatic strategists are crafty. While threatening not to attend round four, tentatively scheduled for late September, Pyongyang might hope its threat not to attend will earn it substantial dividends in the form of increased “economic cooperation” from Beijing, Seoul and possibly elsewhere. If the dividends prove insufficiently enticing, Pyongyang could pull out of the talks at the last minute, but keep the door open for its eventual return, possibly after the US presidential election.

Even if the Six Party Talks continue, South Korea’s credibility problem will persist. Seoul and Washington’s efforts to contain the damage ring hollow, like the young man who claims his girl friend is “a little bit pregnant.” The situation also resembles that of the smoker who promises repeatedly, “I am stopping!” Having stopped twice but resumed a third time does not nurture confidence in the smoker’s pledges. In this regard, both Korea’s have made repeated promises to “stop,” only to eventually resume their nuclear dabbling.

Shared perceptions may feed the two Koreas' appetites for a "self reliant" nuclear capability, a phrase common in both capitals. All Koreans share a common historical legacy and keen sense of national pride. Nineteenth Century history convinced them not to trust arrogant China and greedy Japan. Events in the 20th Century transferred this distrust to other "big powers." Koreans are quick to recall that in 1905, the United States and Japan agreed secretly that Washington could control the Philippines in exchange for Japan dominating the Korean Peninsula. In 1945, after promising Korea independence "in due course," the Soviet Union and the United States first divided Korea and then used it as a battle ground in their superpower Cold War.

Koreans ignore their nurturing of Cold War rivalry on their peninsula. The authoritarian regimes of Kim Il Sung in the north and Park Chong-hui in the south grew dependent upon their respective superpower champion's nuclear umbrellas, and military and economic aid.

By 1980, after recovering economically from the Korean War, both experienced a resurgence of nationalism and reasserted their independence. Paradoxically, they sought to do so while clinging to allies' nuclear umbrellas and military aid. South Korea reluctantly weaned itself first from US aid, but continues to plead for the US military presence and nuclear umbrella. North Korea had no choice after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990 when it lost its nuclear umbrella and Soviet aid.

Absent the Soviet Union, the two Koreas have since concentrated their distrust on the United States, but for opposite reasons. South Korea remains convinced that the US is an unreliable ally regarding its commitment to defend it, especially after the US recently began to shift troops to Iraq. But for the North, the US military presence is perceived as "hostile," especially when viewed through the prism of the Bush Administration's "preemptive" rhetoric. Each Korea thus has moved separately, but for similar reasons, to develop a "self reliant defense capability." For North Korea, this has included a "nuclear deterrence capability." South Korea has moved haltingly in the same direction, but much slower, at least partially because the US nuclear umbrella remains in place. But just in case the US umbrella vanishes and Japan develops its own, South Korean strategists continue to advocate the creation of their own.

Achieving a durable diplomatic resolution of the nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula will require that all the superpowers - the United States, Japan, China and Russia - agree to provide both Koreas convincing security conventional and nuclear assurances prior to demanding anything in return. Only then will Koreans' keen sense of insecurity diminish, erasing a primary motivate to pursue their "self reliant" defense capabilities, irrespective of their international commitments to nuclear non-proliferation.