

The Korean Nuclear Problem – Time to Think Outside the “Box”

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International Action

September 16, 2004

North and South Korea now have another thing in common – both have violated the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), not to mention prior promises to each other and the United States. Obviously, the problem of nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia has not yet been dealt with effectively. We need something more effective than the Bush Administration’s failed strategy of the past nearly four years.

The administration has emphasized everything but diplomacy. First it concentrated on finger pointing, claiming that the Clinton Administration’s Agreed Framework was merely “appeased” North Korea’s “nuclear black mail.” The Administration turned to morality and invented the “Axis of Evil” while also declaring its “pre-emptive” military option. Since July 2003, we have heard much about “multilateral diplomacy.” But this boiled down to a “take it or leave it offer” plus a military option. This more “Godfather” than multilateral diplomacy. Tough rhetoric has not blunted proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This equals failure.

Then there is, “CVID.” Non-proliferation experts of every political persuasion claim this is the ultimate solution. The phrase means, the “complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement” of all North Korean nuclear facilities, including power plants. Everyone except North Korea has signed up to this. The problem is verification. The impressive technological jargon bestowed on “v” does not add up to 100 percent verification. South Korea’s recent confession about its nuclear misconduct confirms this. Apparently not even the CIA knew about this.

For over three decades, the world’s nuclear powers have tried to international treaties International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. This has succeeded in most regions, but not where success is imperative. Its time to think outside the Cold War “box.” Instead of treating this exclusively as a global problem, we need to give regional concerns equal billing. Instead seeing the problem in legal and moral terms, we need to better understand regional security concerns.

On the Korean Peninsula, both Korea’s shared concerns could be behind their quest for a “self reliant” defense posture. All Koreans hold dear their common historical legacy and keen sense of national pride. Their ancestors learned in the 19th Century history not to trust strong and rich China and Japan. In the 20th Century, Koreans transferred their distrust to other “big powers.” They all recall how the United States betrayed their nation in 1905 when it and Japan agreed secretly that Washington could control the Philippines while Japan dominated the Korean Peninsula. In 1945, after promising Korea

independence “in due course,” the Soviet Union and the United States divided Korea and then used it as a Cold War battleground.

Paradoxically, Koreans clung to their respective ally’s nuclear umbrellas and military aid during the Cold War, but uncertainty about their superpower friends persisted. Eventually, the Soviet Union’s collapse ended its nuclear umbrella, which may have contributed to North Korea’s decision to build its own self reliant “nuclear deterrence.”

Meanwhile, US waffling on its defense commitment since the 1970s may unwittingly have nurtured South Korea’s persistent desire for its own self reliant defense capability. South Korea first toyed with nuclear weapons developments in the 1970s in the wake of the Nixon Administration’s withdrawal from South Vietnam and President Carter’s plan to withdraw US troops from South Korea. After a brief pause, nuclear experiments resumed. In the early 1980s, South Korea’s authoritarian ruler feared that the US might force him to choose between democratic elections or US troops departure. No troops were withdrawn, but South Korean uncertainty intensified. In 1992, North Korea’s nuclear ambitions prevented implementation of the former Bush Administration’s plan to phase out US troops from South Korea. But the incumbent Bush has begun the long delayed redeployment.

Meanwhile, North Korea distrusts the US, but for opposite reasons. It sees the US military presence in the south as “hostile.” After the Soviet Union’s demise, the North’s leaders have pursued, like South Korea, a “self reliant” defense.” Initially, this included a nuclear capability. But the 1994 Agreed Framework with the US froze the nuclear option, at least temporarily. Clinton Administration’s reluctance in its final years to defend the accord may have convinced North Korea that the US commitment was wavering. The Bush Administration’s hardnosed diplomatic tactics and invasion of Iraq apparently convinced North Korea that the US threatens its survival and opted to resume building a “nuclear deterrence capability.” South Korea slower movement in a similar direction may be because the US nuclear umbrella remains in place. But if the umbrella vanishes and North Korea demonstrates its nuclear prowess, South Korea is well positioned to resume its “self reliant” nuclear program.

We need to address the root causes for both Koreas nuclear quests. They share a keen sense of insecurity about each other, their neighbors, the superpowers. This suggests that a starting point to build a durable diplomatic resolution of the Korean Peninsula’s nuclear problem could be for all the powers - the United States, Japan, China and Russia - to jointly provide both Koreas convincing conventional and nuclear security assurances, without any preconditions. Only then will Koreans’ keen sense of insecurity diminish, erasing the primary motive for their pursuit of “self reliant” defense capabilities irrespective of their international commitments to nuclear non-proliferation.

The United States, as the most formidable world power, should start the process by restraining its unproductive rhetoric. Instead, it should open a channel for quiet, official diplomatic dialogue with North Korea. After all, successful diplomacy is impossible without diplomatic dialogue, something that the Bush Administration distains.