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## **The Evolution of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis: Implications for Iran**

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*In collaboration with the Atomic Energy Commission (CEA)*

**Chung Min Lee**

*Winter 2009*



**Security Studies Center**

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## *Proliferation Papers*

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Though it has long been a concern for security experts, proliferation has truly become an important political issue over the last decade, marked simultaneously by the nuclearization of South Asia, the weakening of international regimes, and the discovery of fraud and trafficking, the number and gravity of which have surprised observers and analysts alike (Iraq in 1991, Libya until 2004, North Korean and Iranian programs or the A. Q. Khan networks today).

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# Introduction

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The world today is confronted by North Korea that has apparently acquired successfully nuclear weapons, and by Iran that seems bent on acquiring, at a minimum, a virtual nuclear weapons capability. This trend suggests that prospects for freezing, if not rolling back, both Iran's and North Korea's programs are becoming increasingly difficult prospects. While President George W. Bush came under attack for going to war with Iraq based on faulty intelligence assessments and also for labeling Iran, Iraq and North Korea as part of the "axis of evil", it cannot be denied that the world's "most dangerous states with the most dangerous weapons" remain one of the defining security challenges of the post-9/11 era. Nevertheless, the Bush Administration's efforts to prevent, and failing that, to minimize the fallout from a nuclearized North Korea and a potentially nuclear capable Iran, have been decidedly mixed.

Although North Korea maintained nuclear ambiguity for two decades, it finally gave up the pretense of having a "virtual nuclear weapons program" in October 2006 whereas Iran continues on the path of nuclear brinkmanship. Whether Iran is going to cross the nuclear Rubicon remains uncertain but the fact that it has the requisite technologies and the political will to cross the nuclear threshold if it chose to do so remains unchanged. Regardless of Tehran's ultimate choice and attendant strategic consequences, Iran cannot but have gained key glimpses and insights from North Korea's decades-long pursuit of nuclear weapons. While Iran and North Korea have vastly different political histories and national ideologies, their paths have criss-crossed on the road towards nuclearization. Tehran and Pyongyang are not "natural" allies although Iran has benefited from North Korea's ballistic missile sales (such as the Shahab-3 long-range missile). For its part, Pyongyang has gained not only from missile exports to Iran, but perhaps more significantly, by Iran's own nuclear challenge that has divided even further the international community's (and, in particular, the permanent members of the Security Council) responses to nuclear proliferation in the post-Cold War era. Seen from such a perspective, one of the most alarming and troublesome dimension of post-Cold War WMD proliferation is the phenomenon of networked and symbiotic proliferation.



# Nuclear Symbiosis: The Rise of the “Proliferation Network-5”

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Though proliferation dynamics were also at play during the Cold War, the last two decades have witnessed the emergence of a true “Proliferation Network”, substantially different in scope from the ad hoc exchanges typical of the Cold War. To understand the current predicament with respect to the North Korean and Iranian crises, it is therefore necessary to examine the past and retrace that evolution.

On April 9, 2007, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stated that “with great pride, I announce, as of today, our dear country Iran is among the countries of the world that produces an industrial level of nuclear fuel.”<sup>1</sup> Ahmadinejad continues to assert that Iran will not budge “one inch” from its right to enrichment regardless of pressure and criticism from the international community. Eight months prior to Iran’s statement, North Korea carried out a small nuclear test on October 9, 2006 – ending nearly two decades of North Korea’s nuclear ambiguity. North Korea is then a *de facto* nuclear power whereas Iran continues to pursue nuclear ambiguity that has been bolstered, in part, by contrasting intelligence estimates on Iran’s nuclear weapons program.

In a widely reported November 2007 declassified National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) entitled “Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities”, the National Intelligence Council noted that “we judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program; we also assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons... [and] Tehran’s decision to halt its nuclear weapons program suggests it is less determined to develop nuclear weapons than we have been judging since 2005.”<sup>2</sup> The NIE also noted with “high confidence” that “Iran *will not be* technically capable of producing and reprocessing enough plutonium for a weapon before about 2015” but at the same time, concludes that “we assess with high confidence that *Iran has the scientific, technical, and industrial capability eventually to produce nuclear weapons if it decides to do so.*”<sup>3</sup> In the latest International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report released on November 27, 2008, it was noted that “the Agency has been

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<sup>1</sup> Dafna Linzer, “Iran Asserts Expansion of Nuclear Operation”, *Washington Post*, April 10, 2007, p. A9.

<sup>2</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*, Washington D.C., National Intelligence Council, November 2007, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7. (Emphases added).

able to continue to verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material in Iran... [but] unless Iran provides such transparency [such as implementing the modified text of the Subsidiary Arrangements], and implements the Additional Protocol, the Agency will not be able to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran.”<sup>4</sup> The November report also stated that Iran “has not suspended its enrichment related activities” and that it was installing “new cascades and the operation of new generation centrifuges for test purposes.”<sup>5</sup> Prior to submission of the November 2008 report, the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1835 (2008) on September 27 which called upon Iran to comply fully and without delay with all previous resolutions and to abide by IAEA requirements. Resolution 1835 did not include additional sanctions (which Russia opposed) and reaffirmed previous resolutions passed by the Security Council relating to Iran’s non-compliance.

Clearly, proliferation dynamics during the Cold War was also characterized by nuclear symbiosis, or at least by the consequential creation of new security dilemmas. China’s decision to embark on a concerted atomic bomb effort in the aftermath of the Korean War and the earlier 1949 Soviet test, India’s nuclear weapons crash course following China’s own nuclearization in 1964, and Pakistan’s own counterbalancing nuclear program had multiple causes but critically important was that each national program was triggered in large part by an adversary’s or a geostrategic competitor’s nuclearization.

By the end of the 1970s, only two states were believed to have crossed the nuclear threshold outside of the declared nuclear powers – or the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council – namely, Israel and India, although neither of these states were signatories to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and were not, technically speaking, violating nonproliferation protocols and regimes. Yet more troublesome with key strategic implications for proliferation into the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the emergence of a cluster of countries that can perhaps be described as pariah or near-pariah states (heretofore referred to as “Proliferation Network-5” or PN-5) with xenophobic conceptions of national security – Pakistan, Libya, North Korea, Iran, and pre-2003 Iraq – who assumed key roles (as consumers but also as suppliers in the case of Pakistan and North Korea) in the WMD network that began to take shape in earnest from the late 1970s.

The most public manifestation of this WMD network was the one created, nurtured and festered by A.Q. Khan – one of the key architects of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program. This network did more damage – perhaps irreversibly so – to the global nonproliferation regime, particularly the increasingly anemic NPT system, but most importantly, it enabled two breakout states – Pakistan and North Korea – and one near-breakout state

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<sup>4</sup> Report by the Director General on Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008) and 1835 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran, November 27, 2008, GOV/2008/59, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

– Iran – to acquire nuclear weapon capabilities. In all probability, Pakistan’s quest for nuclear weapons would not have been triggered without India’s 1974 nuclear test. But while the Indo-Pakistani strategic rivalry and India’s introduction of the atomic bomb into South Asia answer the question of why Pakistan was compelled to undertake its own nuclear weapons program, this does not in any way rationalize or even remotely justify why Pakistan under the guise of A.Q. Khan and elements of the Pakistani armed forces chose to sell nuclear weapons technologies and fissile materials in a nuclear bazaar. While Libya chose to give up its WMD programs and Iraq’s Saddam Hussein was toppled by the U.S.-led invasion of March 2003, three of the five original PN-5 (Pakistan, North Korea, and Iran) continue to pose significant threats to global proliferation and regional strategic stability.

The PN-5 story, however, is replete with ironies, inconsistencies, key intelligence failures, and in the final analysis, policy and political mistakes. This is not to suggest that successes were absent as evinced by the Anglo-U.S. initiative led by the British government which finally convinced Libya’s Muammar Qadhafi to give up its nuclear and chemical weapons program in December 2003. In a surprising turn of events, Qadhafi’s government declared that Libyan experts showed British and American officials “centrifuges and containers for a chemical material – that can lead to the production of internationally banned weapons” and further, that it had “decided of its free will to get rid of these materials, equipment and programs, and to become totally free of internationally banned weapons”.<sup>6</sup>

But North Korea and Iran (as well as Pakistan and Iraq under Saddam Hussein) operate in a considerably different strategic context than Libya. Other PN-5 members commanded formidable military forces with extensive battlefield experiences although warfighting abilities varied widely as shown by the collapse of Iraqi forces during the first Gulf War and the subsequent March 2003 invasion. That said, from the late 1970s onwards, the PN-5 shared a number of similar traits, including:

(1) identification of the United States as the primary source of external threat (with the notable exception of Pakistan although Islamabad, and in particular, military intelligence, would retain its ambivalence towards the United States)

(2) the call for an independent “deterrent” not only against the United States but also against key regional adversaries (Israel for Iran, Japan and South Korea for North Korea, India for Pakistan)

(3) a hybrid power structure or regimes that were influenced heavily or driven by their militaries, especially in the context of shaping core national security strategies (although much more pronounced in North Korea, Pakistan and pre-2003 Iraq compared to Iran’s theocracy)

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<sup>6</sup> “Libyan Call Against Arms”, *The New York Times*, December 20, 2003. <http://www.nytimes/2003/12/20/international/middleeast/20LTEX.html>

(4) the desire to enhance significantly their relative strategic weights in regional balance of power politics

(5) intense nationalism and personality cults. Concern over Pakistan and North Korea was intensified by the fact that they were considered to be failing or even failed states. Although Pakistan's economic performance improved in the late 1990s, it began to worsen sharply in tandem with the on-going global financial crisis and the country continues to confront a myriad of structural problems that are likely to persist, if not worsen, in the years ahead.<sup>7</sup>

Each of the PN-5 countries were able to pursue their own WMD programs by forming, in effect, their own cartel and WMD market. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the nonproliferation regime had registered not insignificant successes. South Korea's attempts to begin a nuclear weapons research program was shut down under intense U.S. pressure in 1979-1980. Brazil and Argentina walked away from nuclear options. Yet core challenges remained such as South Africa's nuclear weapons program and the increasing likelihood that Pakistan was pursuing its own crash course program after India's 1974 test. More ominous, however, was the creation of a new WMD market. This new market would be created by the happy coincidence or convergence of interests among the PN-5. For starters, there were no formal or informal entry barriers since members of the PN-5 were actively searching for strategic partners. North Korea's reverse engineering of the Scud-B missiles in the 1970s, however, would serve as key export items to Iraq, Pakistan, Iran and Syria. In return, North Korea was able to gain key insights and nuclear weapons related know-how from Pakistan. Iran's "oil for missiles" deal with North Korea was ideal for Tehran. Or as the *Jerusalem Post* noted, North Korea "hopes that it can, by threatening as many countries as possible and exporting nuclear know-how and missiles, continue to extort assistance from the international community. This strategy should sound similar, because it is also that of Iran."<sup>8</sup>

The real "success" of the A.Q. Khan network resulted from the potent combination of woefully inadequate counterintelligence capabilities and policies, the ability of dual-use technology suppliers to bypass and flaunt export controls, and widely divergent political responses from the international community (but particularly those who would be most affected by a nuclearized PN-5) that in the end, enabled the PN-5 to sustain their own "nuclear bazaar" for two decades until the Khan network was presumably shut down in February 2004, although many experts continue to believe that the network has evolved into a post-A.Q. Khan network.

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<sup>7</sup> The departure of General Musharraf and the election of Asif Ali Zardari as the new president on September 6, 2008, has so far not resulted in any major shift in Pakistan's domestic stability including terrorist attacks. For an insightful overview of life after Musharraf, see Joshua Hammer, "After Musharraf", *The Atlantic*, October 2007. <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200710/musharraf>

<sup>8</sup> "North Korea and Iran", *Jerusalem Post*, July 6, 2006. <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1150885937294&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FPrinter>

Indeed, while post-9/11 imperatives have resulted in the strengthening of counterproliferation measures such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and shutting down a growing number of terrorist cells and networks, the A.Q. Khan network demonstrated the all too vivid possibility of WMD spawning and the fact that it may be virtually impossible to track, prevent, and destroy similar networks.



# Progressively Dismantling or Crossing the Nuclear Rubicon?

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Despite two decades of intensive efforts to prevent, or at a minimum, to freeze North Korea from crossing the nuclear Rubicon, Pyongyang detonated a small nuclear device on October 9, 2006.<sup>9</sup> This test brought to closure one of the longest running proliferation debates, i.e., whether North Korea was actively pursuing a nuclear weapons program or whether it was pursuing a “virtual deterrent” as part of its strategic ambiguity vis-à-vis the United States and South Korea. The remaining question is whether North Korea is going to dismantle its nuclear program according to the denuclearization action plan issued on February 13, 2007. Reaffirming the Joint Statement of September 19, 2005, this roadmap agreed to implement the Joint Statement on the principle of “action-for-action” including:

(1) shutting down and sealing the Yongbyon nuclear facility for eventual abandonment including the reprocessing facility

(2) discuss with other parties a list of all of its nuclear programs including plutonium extraction from used fuel rods that would be abandoned

(3) bilateral discussions with the United States to remove North Korea as a state-sponsor of terrorism

(4) bilateral talks with Japan aimed at normalizing relations

(5) provision of emergency energy assistance to the DPRK in the initial phase.<sup>10</sup>

Senior Bush administration officials stated at that time that North Korea’s decision to invite IAEA inspectors into the North by June 25, 2007, to discuss verification procedures was a step forward and Assistant

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<sup>9</sup> Contrary to some initial confusion, the general consensus is that North Korea’s October 9, 2006 test was a low yield of less than one kiloton. For additional details, see Emma Chalett-Avery and Sharon Squassoni, *North Korea’s Nuclear Test: Motivations, Implications, and U.S. Options*, CRS Report for Congress, Washington D.C., Congressional Research Service, October 24, 2006, pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> “North Korea – Denuclearization Action Plan”, Office of the Spokesman, U.S. Department of State, Washington D.C., February 13, 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/february/80479.htm>

Secretary of State Christopher Hill stated that “political will is something we are going to need, but from the technical point of view, I think all of it is quite doable.”<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, prospects for a fundamental resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis through the Six Party Talks (between the two Koreas, the United States, Japan, China, and Russia) cannot be ruled out, especially if the Obama Administration presses for direct negotiations although they are likely to proceed more cautiously compared to comments made during the campaign.<sup>12</sup> Theoretically, North Korea could agree to irreversible and verifiable dismantlement in exchange for unprecedented economic and energy assistance, full normalization of ties with the United States and Japan, and the lifting of most economic sanctions and trade barriers. Such a decision by the DPRK would mark the most radical departure in North Korean policy and strategy since the end of the Korean War. Thus, based on North Korea’s level of compliance with the February 13, 2007, guidelines and subsequent follow-on measures, it is hard to believe that North Korea will ultimately abide by all of the provisions leading to final dismantlement. Indeed, contrary to conventional wisdom that North Korea is prepared to give up its nuclear arsenal in return for key security assurances and tangible incentives, perhaps the most important lesson to be discerned from nearly twenty years of coping with the North Korean nuclear crisis is that while all of the principal stakeholders agree on declaratory goals – a denuclearized North Korea – in reality, they have opted for “temporary acceptance” of a nuclearized North Korea until such time that the Six Party Talks bear fruit or if and when North Korea collapses.

In his State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002, President George W. Bush stated that a key goal of the United States was to “prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction” and that “the United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.”<sup>13</sup> In practice, however, with the exception of Iraq, U.S. policy towards the other two members of the “axis of evil” – North Korea and Iran – have been significantly more nuanced with a premium on finding viable diplomatic solutions. The United States and South Korea have already tolerated a North Korea with nuclear weapons and while the Six Party Talks may ultimately succeed, the gap between

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<sup>11</sup> “Inspectors to Visit North Korea”, *The New York Times*, June 18, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/world/AP-Koreas-Nuclear.html>. See also “North Korea Says it Invites UN Nuclear Inspectors”, *International Herald Tribune*, June 16, 2007. [www.iht.com/bin/print.php](http://www.iht.com/bin/print.php)

<sup>12</sup> Based on discussions with key nonproliferation officials in the incoming Obama Administration, January 14-15, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> “The President’s State of the Union Address”, January 29, 2002, Washington D.C. <http://whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/2002129-11.htm>. This speech received significant notoriety when Bush referred to Iraq, Iran and North Korea and others as part of an “axis of evil” for pursuing WMD and the possibility that they “could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.”

rhetoric and policy have been noticed most by the two countries that were the targets – Iran and North Korea. As a former CIA officer with extensive Middle Eastern experience recently wrote, “Iran called the Bush administration’s bluff on nuclear weapons, not slowing down in the least of its nuclear program... As long as the price of oil is high, there is little chance that Iran will suffer serious economic hardship that would force it to alter its policy.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, one of the key strategic lessons of the continuing North Korean nuclear saga – with key implications for other would-be nuclear weapon states such as Iran – is that a determined dictatorship, armed with formidable non-nuclear military capabilities, highly specialized indigenous scientific and technological abilities, and the ability to muster the requisite financial resources, can successfully manufacture nuclear weapons in defiance of nonproliferation protocols and coercive threats.

Although it is virtually impossible to predict how long it will take North Korea to agree to a viable verification protocol in order to implement the February 12, 2007, guidelines in addition to more intrusive inspection regimes that have yet to be agreed to, the probability of complete dismantlement remains low. It is critical to understand that the leverage North Korea receives from its nuclear status outweighs the strategic benefits from giving up its nuclear program. In this sense, the costs for North Korea to give up its nuclear capability could be higher than retaining it. Kim’s power rests in large part on pushing the “threat envelope” with the United States, Japan, and South Korea which provides only limited incentive in pursuing decisive *détente*. Moreover, while Kim Jong Il seems to be recovering from a partial stroke that apparently occurred in mid-August 2008, the military would be most keen in maintaining an aura of invincibility in an extremely delicate period in North Korea, i.e., growing uncertainties surrounding succession politics. For example, if Kim Jong Il embarks on the path of nuclear dismantlement, it would set into motion other triggers such as economic reforms, normalization of relations with the United States and Japan, and substantially improved South-North relations which the North Korean military would have to cope with.

Yet each of these developments could be fraught with unintended consequences. One of the central tenets of North Korea’s fundamental national security *Weltanschauung* is the concept of overlapping layers of strategic vulnerability in the face of U.S., South Korean, and Japanese threats. Pyongyang’s propaganda machinery will market normalization with the United States as a “strategic victory” for the DPRK. However, normalization will alter a core rationale of North Korea’s foreign policy, i.e., the need for eternal vigilance against the one country held responsible for virtually all of North Korea’s ills and the corresponding need to maintain a totalitarian system. Should Kim Jong Il embark on ambitious economic reforms like China or Vietnam, he would confront a series of choices that cannot but weaken his family’s and the ruling elites’ iron grip on power. Thus, while there are those who continue to maintain that Kim Jong Il is more than willing to bargain away his nuclear weapons if the price is right,

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Baer, “Iranian Resurrection”, *The National Interest*, no. 98, November-December 2008, p. 45.

the problem is that the “right price” is something no outside powers can ultimately guarantee: an iron-clad assurance of the Kim Dynasty’s hold on power, especially in the post-Kim Jong Il era.

Therefore, the DPRK’s and, in reality, Kim Jong Il’s primordial Catch-22 is that while North Korea needs to undertake wide-ranging reforms if the State is going to remain viable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, each reform measure could dilute the very fabric of the Kim Dynasty. As a result, Kim Jong Il’s *political capacity* to give up North Korea’s nuclear capabilities is constrained significantly by the very threat such a step poses to regime survival. His preferred alternative is perhaps a nuclear freeze – or destroying his capacity to manufacture more nuclear weapons but retaining whatever he has already produced – in exchange for significant infusion of aid from South Korea and the United States. As one leading Russian observer of North Korea has written, “North Korea can afford to shut down the research facilities because it no longer needs to produce any more nuclear weapons... But Pyongyang will keep what nuclear weapons it has already produced, because that, to the North Korean regime, is the most rational policy.”<sup>15</sup>

Arguably, a significant difference between Iran’s and North Korea’s quest for nuclear weapons lies in the extent to which Tehran’s and Pyongyang’s survivability depends on attaining nuclear capabilities and the divergent nature of the two regimes. However, notwithstanding the contrasting strategic culture and political foundations of the regimes in Tehran and Pyongyang, the two continue to perceive nuclear capabilities as cornerstones of their respective national security strategies although in the case of North Korea, regime survival is a much more critical imperative. Kim Jong Il’s quest for nuclear weapons is more closely tied to regime survival given the Korean People’s Army’s (KPA) overarching role in bolstering the Kim Dynasty. His personal survival is enhanced significantly by nuclear weapons as a manifestation of his “military first” doctrine or by the same token, precisely because they increase tension with his foreign adversaries.

In Iran’s case, pursuing a nuclear weapons program is seen as a manifestation of Iran’s broader strategic ambitions in the region and while differences are evident between the various factions in Tehran (such as the “reformists” under the wing of former President Hashemi Rafsanjani), criticisms have been leveled at Ahmadinejad’s provocative statements but not against the nuclear program itself.<sup>16</sup> Ahmadinejad’s political survival or that of Iran’s theocratic regime does not seem to depend critically on whether Iran acquires nuclear weapons. To be sure, it could also be argued that to the extent that Iran’s political system is more open relative to North Korea’s, Tehran’s ability to at least review contrasting strategies and policies is presumably more flexible.

<sup>15</sup> Andrei Lankov, “Why N. Korea Won’t Give Up its Nuclear Weapons”, *Chosun Ilbo*, May 4, 2007.

<http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200705/200705040029.html>

<sup>16</sup> Tim Guldemann, “The Iranian Nuclear Impasse”, *Survival*, vol. 49, no. 3, Autumn 2007, p. 171.

As a recent *Center for a New American Security* report noted, “from the Saudi and British examples, as well as policy shifts in other arenas, it is clear that Iranian leaders are fully capable of reversing core policies and embracing old enemies.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, whether Iran is really willing to consider radically different foreign and national security policies is open to question. For example, the same report goes on to state that:

[I]t also must be acknowledged that there remains no hard evidence that Iranian leaders have ever been prepared, fully and authoritatively, to make epic concessions on the key areas of U.S. concern. Even more uncertain is whether Iran has had or will ever attain the level of policy coordination and institutional coherence that would enable any overarching agreement to be implemented successfully.

Thus, notwithstanding the contrasting strategic imperatives and political foundations of Iran’s and North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs, both have benefited from and are united by “nuclear nationalism”. As one journalist has noted, “it doesn’t matter what faction it is, from the religious conservatives to the left, there’s a consensus that Iran has a right to pursue the nuclear fuel cycle, and that indeed it has a right to develop nuclear weapons if it chooses.”<sup>18</sup>

According to a U.S.-based Iranian expert, polls illustrate that 80 percent of Iranians support the country’s nuclear ambitions.<sup>19</sup> Based on decades of propaganda and the enduring belief of an existential threat from the United States, one can probably deduce that a high percentage of North Koreans support Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program even though they may certainly have reservations about Kim Jong Il and his regime.

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<sup>17</sup> Suzanne Maloney, *Diplomatic Strategies for Dealing with Iran: How Tehran Might Respond*, Washington D.C., Center for a New American Security, September 2008, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Howard LaFranchi, “If Iran Goes Nuclear...”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 23, 2004. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/1123/p01s01-usfp-htm>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



# Facing Three Quandaries

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From the onset of the first North Korean nuclear crisis in March 1993 when Pyongyang initially announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT, to the eruption of the second nuclear crisis in October 2002 when North Korean officials apparently admitted (and has since recanted) to its clandestine Highly-Enriched Uranium (HEU) program, and finally, when North Korea turned critical by conducting an underground nuclear test on October 9, 2006, one could argue that Iran was able to discern *three key lessons*.

First, the *de facto* acceptance although not recognition on the part of the principal stakeholders of a nuclearized North Korea until such time that the Six Party Talks or bilateral negotiations result in a successfully denuclearized North Korea. Second, the need to test and to verify whether Pyongyang's nuclear program was conditional, i.e., whether it would be ready, with security assurances and matching incentives, to give up its nuclear weapons. And third, structural constraints posed by preventing two worst-case outcomes – a North Korea that actually goes nuclear and a potentially even larger crisis in the event of a use of force to prevent it from going nuclear, and having failed to do so, destroying North Korea's nuclear capabilities. The Clinton Administration contemplated military options prior to the signing of the Agreed Framework on October 21, 1994, but was deterred due to the very real threat of major war on the Korean Peninsula. Thus, while all of the regional stakeholders were unable to dissuade North Korea from going nuclear (thus living with the first worst-case scenario of a nuclearized North Korea), none of them was willing to contemplate in any realistic way the potential for a second worst-case scenario, i.e. the outbreak of major war on the Korean Peninsula. While the circumstances are admittedly quite different, and while there is no hard evidence on the matter, it stands to reason that Iran would have absorbed these key lessons on its own path towards nuclearization, especially in terms of assessing in great detail North Korea's negotiating tactics with the United States (and through the Six Party Talks), and in particular, key repercussions and responses after its October 2006 test. However, before proceeding to illustrate this point, a few initial caveats are in order.

## ***A Stronger Iran in a More Dangerous Environment***

Clearly, any lessons Tehran may have learned from the North Korean nuclear program would have to be calibrated with the very different strategic environments in the Middle East and Northeast Asia, including the Israeli factor. If Iran chooses to go nuclear, Israel would have to seriously contemplate the opportunity costs tendered by a nuclear Iran versus

strategic fallout from an attack quite apart from the fact that such an operation would actually succeed. But Tehran must have surely noticed that despite the gravity of North Korea's nuclear test, Pyongyang has so far been able to withstand international sanctions and pressures. One major caveat, of course, is that Israel's strategic calculus differs from South Korea's in that the Israeli leadership has emphasized that a nuclearized Iran would be deemed an existential threat and that Israel would contemplate all options, including, presumably, a military strike option. As a case in point, on September 6, 2007, Israel launched an attack on an incomplete Syrian nuclear reactor that was apparently built with North Korean assistance. Subsequently, the CIA released a video that showed that the Syrian reactor resembled the North Korean reactor at Yongbyon in addition to the chief North Korean nuclear scientist who was photographed with his counterpart in Syria.<sup>20</sup>

There exists, of course, clear political, cultural, and structural differences between Iran and North Korea which can make direct comparison misleading. Unlike Iran, North Korea is an economic basket-case that is almost wholly dependent on life preserving aid from China and South Korea. As an example, North Korea's threat to go nuclear from the mid-1990s provided the regime with substantial influxes of foreign aid – totaling some \$4 billion since 1995 from the United States, South Korea, and China. South Korea's aid package to North Korea (including non-governmental aid such as food, coal, medical supplies, etc.) from 1995 until September 2008 totaled \$2 billion excluding \$500 million in cash payments to Pyongyang for the June 2000 summit. From 1995-2007, the United States dispensed a total of \$1.3 billion (60 % in food aid and 40 % in energy assistance) whereas the Chinese government (from 1995-2005) provided a total of some \$340 million in energy and food assistance to North Korea. Other assistance from Japan and the broader international community (including the EU) also topped some \$1 billion over the past decade.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, while the Security Council is very likely to adopt resolutions against Iran if it conducts a nuclear test, Tehran may rightly

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<sup>20</sup> Uzi Mahnaimi and Michael Sheridan, "Israelis hit Syrian 'nuclear bomb plant'", *The Sunday Times*, December 2, 2007. [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle\\_east/article2983719](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article2983719). See also, David E. Sanger and Mark Mazzetti, "Israel Struck Syrian Nuclear Project, Analysts Say", *The New York Times*, October 14, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/14/washington/14weapon.html>. Seymour Hersh argues in an article in *The New Yorker* that "there is evidence that the preemptive raid on Syria was also meant as a warning about—and a model for—a preemptive attack on Iran. When I visited Israel this winter, Iran was the overriding concern among political and defense officials I spoke to—not Syria. There was palpable anger toward Washington, it the wake of a National Intelligence Estimate that concluded, on behalf of the American intelligence community, that Iran is not now constructing a nuclear weapon. Many in Israel view Iran's ambitions as an existential threat; they believe that military action against Iran may be inevitable, and worry that America may not be there when needed." Seymour M. Hersh, "A Strike in the Dark", *The New Yorker*, February 11, 2008. [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/200802/11/080211fa\\_fact\\_hersh](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/200802/11/080211fa_fact_hersh)

<sup>21</sup> Data derived from *Monthly Report Inter-Korean Exchanges & Cooperation*, various months, Ministry of Unification and *China-North Korea Economic Relations and South Korea's Response*, Seoul, KIEP, July 2005, p. 7.

conclude that the net effect of economic sanctions would be minimized on account of North Korea's own track record and more importantly, the fact that its oil revenues provide it with greater economic resilience. On the other hand, Iran is also much more engaged with the outside world and highly unlikely to aspire to Pyongyang's level of isolation, which could make it more vulnerable to coercion – as was illustrated by Iran's reaction to its isolation and the general lack of support from the non aligned movement at the IAEA Board of Governors and at the UNSC since 2004.<sup>22</sup> That said, both have gained from each other's nuclear forays and it would be almost natural to assume that the Iranian leadership benchmarked North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship since the early 1990s.

### ***The Impact of North Korea's Nuclear Test***

Immediately after North Korea's October 2006 nuclear test, for example, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1718 (2006) on October 14, which announced unprecedented sanctions against the DPRK including the cessation of weapons systems transfers designated under the UN Register on Conventional Arms, prevention of the transfer of technologies related to ballistic missiles, WMD-related programs, and nuclear-related materials and technologies, and luxury goods. The resolution noted that it was "preventing a range of goods from entering or leaving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and imposes an asset freeze and travel ban on persons related to the nuclear-weapon program."<sup>23</sup> Earlier on July 15, 2006, the Security Council passed Resolution 1695 (2006) condemning the DPRK's missile tests. Resolution 1695 stipulated, in part, that all member states should "exercise vigilance and prevent missile and missile-related items, materials, goods and technology being transferred to DPRK's missile or WMD programs."<sup>24</sup>

Although Russian and Chinese support was crucial in adopting these two resolutions, Moscow and Beijing also urged restraint. Chinese envoy to the United Nations Wang Guangya stated, in part, that "China noted with satisfaction that, in condemning the DPRK nuclear test, the parties concerned had all indicated the importance of adhering to diplomatic efforts."<sup>25</sup> Russian envoy Vitaly I. Churkin "regretted" North Korea's nuclear test and called it an "irresponsible step" but "emphasized that sanctions unilaterally adopted by States did not facilitate resolution of such problems, when the Council was working on joint approaches, with the participation of all relevant parties."<sup>26</sup> Taken together, and despite the fact that these UN sanctions have not been lifted, all of the permanent

<sup>22</sup> Howard LaFranchi, "Is Iran Studying North Korea's nuclear moves?," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 23, 2006. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0623/p01-usfp.html>

<sup>23</sup> Security Council SC/8853, "Security Council Condemns Nuclear Test by Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1718 (2006), 14 October 2006. <http://www.un.org/News/press/docs/2006/sc8853.doc.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Security Council SC/8778, "Security Council Condemns Democratic People's Republic of Korea's Missile Launches, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1695" (2006), 15 July 2006. <http://www.un.org/News/press/docs/2006/sc8778.doc.htm>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Security Council members have placed greater importance in ensuring the diplomatic track over strict compliance with these and other sanctions.

Although it is impossible to verify specific lessons Iran may have incorporated from North Korea (and vice versa), it stands to reason that Iran is likely to have closely observed the reaction to North Korea's nuclear test and the subsequent three key lessons that can be inferred from North Korea's nuclear diplomacy.

### **De facto Acceptance Trumps Principles**

*First lesson:* Iran may have noticed the international community's *de facto* "acceptance", at least temporarily, of a nuclearized North Korea (and potentially a nuclearized Iran, should Tehran pursue weaponization) despite continuing adherence to the principle of "zero-tolerance". Ever since North Korea's nuclear weapons program first began to be noticed in the late 1980s, many questioned intelligence assessments which stipulated that North Korea was intent on pursuing a nuclear weapons program.<sup>27</sup> While the lack of and/or misuse of intelligence findings leading up to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq is now considered to be one of the principal WMD-related intelligence failure case studies, the long running North Korean nuclear saga presented equally daunting challenges to the intelligence community, primarily, although by no means limited to, the United States, South Korea, Japan and People's Republic of China (PRC). By the time the Agreed Framework was signed in October 1994, the policy and intelligence communities in Seoul and Washington were convinced that North Korea was well on the path of a comprehensive nuclear weapons program although in the absence of an actual test, there was no definitive proof that Pyongyang was working on weaponization. On the key question of whether North Korea pursued an HEU program as Pyongyang apparently stated during Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly's visit to Pyongyang in October 2002, the U.S. intelligence community remains divided on the extent of North Korea's HEU program. The key point of contention was not whether North Korea sought a uranium enrichment capacity but how far such a program progressed. As an example, David

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<sup>27</sup> As a case in point, the *New York Times* reported in December 2003 that then Chinese premier Wen Jiabao stated in a U.N. speech on December 2003 that "at present [North Korea did not have] an objective to possess nuclear weapons", a statement that seemed to contradict intelligence reports and North Korea's own claims that it has a small nuclear arsenal. David Sanger, "U.S. and 2 Allies Agree on a Plan for North Korea", *The New York Times*, December 8, 2003. <http://query.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F50812F83B590C7B8CDDA B0994DB404482>. See also Bruce E. Bechtol's article in *East Asian Review* where he writes that during a visit to North Korea by former U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Donald Gregg and journalist Don Oberdorfer in October 2002, a handwritten note from Kim Jong Il was given to them which reportedly stated that "if the United States recognizes our sovereignty and assures non-aggression, it is our view that we should be able to find a way to resolve the nuclear issue in compliance with the demands of a new century... and if the U.S. makes a bold decision, we will respond accordingly." Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., "U.S.-North Korean Relations and the Bush Administration: The Political-Diplomatic Dimension of the Nuclear Confrontation", *East Asian Review*, vol. 17, no. 4, Winter 2005, p. 127.

Kay, the former U.S. official in charge of investigating Iraq's nuclear program, stated in March 2007 that the Bush Administration's claims about North Korea's uranium program were unpersuasive and that "they were driving it way further than the evidence indicated it should go" and that the leap of logic of turning equipment purchase to evidence morphed into a "significant production capability." At the same time, however, leading U.S. intelligence officials such as John E. McLaughlin, a former CIA director and deputy CIA director in 2002, have stated that assessments that were made at that time were accurate. "At the time we reported this, we had confidence that they were acquiring materials that could give them the capability to do this down the road", and that no one "said they had anything up and running. We also made clear that we did not have a confident understanding of how far along they were."<sup>28</sup>

Until the October 9, 2006 nuclear test in Gilju, however, all open source literature on North Korea's nuclear weapons program were based on divergent estimates. While the circumstances are different, the on-going Iranian nuclear crisis also illustrates the extent to which successive Iranian regimes, but particularly under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have exploited similar ambiguity surrounding Iran's probable nuclear weapons program. Faulty or limited intelligence owing to the closed nature of the target (North Korea as well as Iran) coupled with divergent policy objectives (within and between key actors) have contributed to strategic discord. For example, both South Korea and the United States have maintained numerous "Red Lines" and "zero tolerance" principle towards North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Yet each time North Korea wretched up the pressure, e.g., the August 1998 Taepodong-1 test launch, the apparent North Korean admission in October 2002 clandestine HEU program, the second Taepodong-2 test of July 2006, and the October 2006 underground nuclear test, the four major powers and South Korea continued to maintain that efforts to denuclearize North Korea must not be discontinued. As the gap between policy guidelines and ultimate actions began to widen in the context of the North Korean nuclear crisis, the fact remained that the principle of "zero tolerance" metamorphosed into a *de facto* principle of "co-existing", albeit temporarily, with a nuclearized North Korea.

A similar transformation could be underway in the Iranian context. Tehran continues to maintain its position that it has the right and the ability to enrich nuclear fuel but that it will not actually manufacture nuclear weapons. But many doubt whether Iran is actually going to stop short of weaponization and maintain a "virtual" nuclear capacity. On December 23, 2006 when the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1737, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated that "today, the Security Council responded unanimously to the threat presented by *Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons*

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<sup>28</sup> David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "U.S. Had Doubts on North Korean Uranium Drive", *The New York Times*, March 1, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/01/washington/01korea.html?n=Top%2fNews%2fWorld%2fCountries%20and%20Territories%2fNorth%20Korea>

capability.”<sup>29</sup> To date, Iran has refused to comply with Resolution 1737, which compelled the Security Council to adopt Resolution 1747 in March 2007 calling for additional sanctions for non-compliance. Subsequently, the Security Council passed Resolution 1803 (2008) on March 3, which reaffirmed previous Security Council resolutions and imposed new sanctions for Iran’s refusal to suspend uranium enrichment and heavy-water related projects. On the key question of whether Iran was willing to suspend its fuel cycle activities, EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana stated in July 2008 that the six countries (the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany) did not yet have an “answer to that important question”.<sup>30</sup>

### **Why Engagement May Not Meet Pyongyang’s Needs**

*Second lesson:* Upon receiving security assurances, Pyongyang stands ready to begin the process of dismantling its nuclear facilities and capabilities. One of the core tenets of the engagement school is the belief that North Korea’s nuclear ambitions were triggered by deeply rooted vulnerabilities. The so-called “Sunshine Policy” which was pursued by the Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo Hyun governments from 1998 to 2008 emphasized two key points: (1) only sustained engagement is going to change North Korean behavior such as adopting economic reforms; and (2) once North Korea’s “strategic vulnerability” is considerably diminished by a series of security assurances and matching economic incentives, the DPRK will commit itself to the process of denuclearization. Moreover, if North Korea’s nuclear weapons program was driven by the imperative of regime survival, i.e., to have a “bullet proof” deterrent vis-à-vis the United States, it stands to reason that once Pyongyang receives requisite security assurances, regime survival would no longer presumably be dependent on maintaining its own nuclear arsenal.

Indeed, this is the critical litmus test by which to measure the viability of on-going negotiations with the North or the abiding belief that Pyongyang’s insecurity stems from external sources (such as the United States) and not on the basis of the unique power structure of the North Korean regime. In the final analysis, however, Kim Jong Il’s insecurities are self-generated and his survival does not seem to be linked to external security assurances but rather, on the vulnerabilities and systemic inconsistencies created and fostered by the North Korean regime given its hybrid nature consisting of three key pillars: (1) a family dynasty founded by Kim Il Sung; (2) state-sponsored criminal and illicit activities (such as money laundering and counterfeit, drug trafficking, and smuggling) that

<sup>29</sup> “Statement on the United Nations Security Council Resolution on Iran”, U.S. Department of State, Press Release, December 23, 2006. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/78245.htm>. (Emphasis added).

<sup>30</sup> Security Council SC/9268, “Security Council Tightens Restrictions on Iran’s Proliferation-Sensitive Nuclear Activities, Increases Vigilance over Iranian Banks, Has States Inspect Cargo”, 3 March 2008. <http://un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sc9268.doc.htm>. See also Peter Crail, “Iran Not Receptive to Revised Nuclear Proposal”, *Arms Control Today*, September 2008. [http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008\\_09/IranProposal](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008_09/IranProposal).

provides huge amounts of hard currency for Kim Jong Il and his cronies; and (3) a military-dominant communist regime.

Evidence of the weakness of the engagement thesis may be found in the evolution of North Korea's statements about the purposes of its nuclear program. On the day of the underground nuclear test, the official North Korean statement noted, in part, that "the nuclear test was conducted with 100 percent indigenous wisdom and technology. It marks a historic event as it greatly encouraged and pleased the KPA [Korean People's Army] and people that have wished to have powerful self-reliant defense capability."<sup>31</sup> Previous statements emphasized the importance of having an indigenous "nuclear deterrent" in order to counter-balance U.S. nuclear capabilities and self-defense in the face of aggressive U.S. military policy. Prior to and even in the aftermath of North Korea's nuclear test, proponents of engagement have continued to assert the critical importance of understanding North Korea's deeply ingrained sense of insecurity. Therefore, notwithstanding the dangers posed by North Korea's nuclear capabilities, it has been argued that North Korea's nuclear ambitions have to be understood in the context of regime survival as the primordial goal of the DPRK. As such, so long as North Korea's insecurities can be addressed fully, e.g., by the removal of the threat of regime change by the United States through a solid security guarantee, engagement proponents maintain that it is reasonable to assume that North Korea is willing to dismantle its nuclear capabilities and programs. If so, however, one is led to logically conclude that North Korea's pursuit of a nuclear weapons program is only marginally linked to the motive of regime survival.

### ***Between a Rock and a Hard Place***

*Third lesson:* Avoiding two worst case outcomes poses considerable strategic constraints to the proliferator's opponents. From the onset of the North Korean nuclear crisis, strategists and decision-makers have been confronted with the North Korean variant of a Gordian knot; namely, that in order to avoid one worst case outcome – a North Korea (or Iran) with nuclear weapons – one must contemplate another worst case outcome – the potential for major war on the Korean Peninsula (or the Middle East) in the event that military force is used as a last resort. Indeed, this central quandary encapsulates the tension of opposites that has permeated throughout the life cycle of the North Korean as well as the Iranian nuclear crises. In June 1994 just a few months prior to the conclusion of the October 1994 Agreed Framework which temporarily terminated the first North Korean nuclear crisis, then Secretary of Defense William Perry was on the verge of contemplating military action to destroy North Korea's nuclear capabilities. In subsequent commentaries, Perry has recalled that:

That crisis was the only time in my tenure as Secretary of Defense that we came close to a major war. We were willing to risk war

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<sup>31</sup> "DPRK Successfully Conducts Underground Nuclear Test", October 9, 2006, Korean Central News Agency of DPRK, [www.kcna.co.jp/calender-e/frame.htm](http://www.kcna.co.jp/calender-e/frame.htm)

because we believed that a nuclear weapon production program in North Korea posed unacceptable security risk.<sup>32</sup>

Perry gave four reasons why the U.S. felt that a nuclearized North Korea was unacceptable: (1) its leaders might be misled to believing that the United States would be unwilling to defend its interests and allies in the region which would have the effect of weakening U.S. deterrence; (2) it could trigger a nuclear domino in East Asia that could compel South Korea, Japan and Taiwan to pursue their own nuclear options in a relatively short period of time given their already existing technological capabilities; (3) the possibility of fissile materials and products of the nuclear program could be transferred to third parties including terrorist groups; and (4) to prevent the specter of “loose nukes” since “sooner or later we expected the regime will collapse and when that happened, we did not want it with a nation that possessed a nuclear weapon arsenal.”<sup>33</sup> Then South Korean President Kim Young Sam, however, has denied that military options were seriously considered and that in any event, the United States could not take unilateral military action against North Korean nuclear facilities without full support by the South Korean government.<sup>34</sup>

In the Iranian case, the use of force would probably be contemplated by either the United States or Israel although any decision to use force would have to satisfy the following conditions: (1) The availability of nearly faultless intelligence on Iran’s nuclear facilities and capabilities. (2) A high probability that in the aftermath of an attack, Iran’s ability to reconstitute its nuclear program would be incapacitated in addition to destroying its nuclear capabilities. (3) The high probability of direct conflict between Iran and Israel (assuming Israel takes the lead) and rapid escalation of tensions in the greater Middle East. According to Western press reports, Israel has allegedly conducted mock-up attacks on Iran’s Natanz uranium enrichment plant.<sup>35</sup> But a report published by the Institute for National Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, on possible military options also notes that Israel confronts a key dilemma in considering a military solution.

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<sup>32</sup> William Perry, “Nuclear Confrontations with North Korea: Lessons of the 1994 Crisis for Today”, *YaleGlobal*, May 28, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> In his memoirs published in 2001, former President Kim Young Sam wrote that “on June 16, 1994, I received a report from the National Security Advisor that U.S. Ambassador James Laney was about to give a press conference and that he was going to call for the evacuation of U.S. forces’ and embassy dependents. I was totally surprised. This was a step that was about to be taken immediately before the breakout of hostilities. Apparently, Ambassador Laney told his children and grandchildren to prepare for evacuation. I therefore summoned in private Ambassador Laney and told him ‘as soon as the United States bombs North Korea, the South will be destroyed by North Korea’s counter-attack. As long as I am president, war is not an option nor is U.S. intervention. As the commander chief of the Korean armed forces, not one single soldier from among the 600,000-strong army will be mobilized.” Cited in *Chosun Ilbo*, February 2, 2001. [http://news.chosun.com/svc/content\\_view.html?contid=2001021670381](http://news.chosun.com/svc/content_view.html?contid=2001021670381)

<sup>35</sup> Uzi Mahnaimi, “Revealed: Israel plans strike on Iranian nuclear plant”, *The Sunday Times*, March 13, 2005.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article1290331.ece>

The objective of Israeli or American military action is a significant delay of at least a few years in Iran's completion of its nuclear project, in the hope that a more moderate regime will emerge, and be willing to abandon the program and accept the European-American package of incentives. *The alternative – of halting Iran's nuclear program altogether – would be difficult to achieve by military means...* A full obstruction of Iran's drive towards nuclear weapons would require years of repeated attacks against Iran's nuclear sites, including sites rebuilt after previous military strikes, until the government in Tehran were to abandon the goal of acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>36</sup>

While proponents of a military solution (in both North Korea and Iran) are in a distinct minority, one controversial analyst noted that a "bombing campaign would without question set back its [Iran's] nuclear program for years to come, and might even lead to the overthrow of the mullahs."<sup>37</sup> Yet it remains highly suspect whether (1) a surgical strike would be able to target and destroy Iran's nuclear facilities; and (2) that a military strike would set back Iran's nuclear program "for years to come."<sup>38</sup>

In summary, the United States and South Korea have, for all intents and purposes, foreclosed military options with the exception of scenarios when war may be imminent, North Korea launches a preventive strike against U.S. and South Korean forces, or it is verified that North Korea transferred fissile materials or key nuclear weapon technologies to a terrorist group such as Al Qaida. Insofar as Iran is concerned, while the Bush Administration continued to maintain its position that a nuclear-armed Iran is "unacceptable" and emphasized that "all options" are on the table, the North Korean nuclear crisis has shown the limitations of a surgical strike alternative. Indeed, in both the North Korean and Iranian contexts, any serious military campaign must take into consideration the possibility of a prolonged conflict with Iran or North Korea that would result in the aforementioned second worst-case scenario, namely a major conflict in the the Korean Peninsula or pronounced instability in the Middle East

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<sup>36</sup> Ephraim Kam, *A Nuclear Iran: What Does it Mean, and What Can be Done*, Tel Aviv, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, February 2007, p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Norman Pohoretz, "The Case for Bombing Iran," *Commentary*, June 2007, p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> According to a 2004 report published by the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, the Israeli attack on the Osirak nuclear plant in June 1981 momentarily setback Iraq's nuclear ambitions but also "served rather to reinforce and increase Saddam's desire for a nuclear arsenal". Citing a former Iraqi nuclear scientist, Imad Khadduri, the Israeli attack had the exactly opposite effect—of convincing Saddam Hussein to go on "overdrive" on his nuclear program. Khadduri is quoted as saying, in part, "Israel—actually, what Israel [did] is that it got out the immediate danger out of the way. But it created a much larger danger in the longer range...They [Israel] estimated we'd make 7kg of plutonium a year, which is enough for one bomb. And they get scared and bombed it out. Actually it was much less than this, and it would have taken much longer. But the program we built later in secret would make six bombs a year." Quoted in Sammy Salama and Karen Ruster, *A Preemptive Attack on Iran's Nuclear Facilities: Possible Consequences*, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, August 12, 2004. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that Iraqi nuclear scientists also consistently bloated, exaggerated and at times even fabricated reports to Saddam Hussein after the first Gulf War. <http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/week/040812.htm>



# The Making of Nuclear Cousins: Lessons for the Future

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The world will never really know whether Pyongyang remains disposed to giving up its nuclear capabilities unless it chooses to do so. Although it is virtually impossible to ascertain without any ambiguity the root motivations behind North Korea's nuclear weapons program, the historical path of North Korea's nuclear crisis suggests strongly that if North Korea was ready to give up its nuclear capabilities after receiving security assurances from the United States, it would have done so in order to end decades of political isolation and conditional economic assistance. But if one continues to believe that North Korea is willing to ultimately bargain away its nuclear capabilities, it would be necessary to discount all the various "threats" the United States poses to North Korea above and beyond the threat of regime change.

First, regardless of the fact that the Clinton and Bush Administrations each provided assurances on numerous occasions that the United States will not use force to change the North Korean regime, a "non use of force" guarantee is inherently weak since it obviously would not hold in the event that North Korean actions posed a "clear and present danger" to South Korea. It obviously does not mean abandoning the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty. In other words, even if the United States were to extend a security guarantee to the Kim Jong Il regime, North Korea would still remain presumably under "threat" not only from the 28,500 U.S. troops stationed in the South but the broader and much more powerful military power the United States would bring to bear in case of war or near-war situations. Moreover, Kim Jong Il's security ultimately depends on domestic determinants within North Korea and not, as some perceive, on security guarantees provided by the United States.

Second, assuming for the moment that such logic can be put aside momentarily and that North Korea decides to incrementally dismantle its nuclear arsenals (as many analysts currently assume it will), one would have to make a huge leap of faith to also believe that North Korea would also undertake other tension-reduction steps such as a ballistic missile test moratorium, termination of its long-range missile programs, cessation of other WMD programs (such as bio-chemical weapons), and restructuring its conventional forces that are poised for a potential offensive across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. In other words, even if North Korea dismantles its nuclear capabilities, there is hardly any assurance that it would also enact other crucial Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) to reduce significantly military tensions along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). If so, it stands to

reason that while the ROK-U.S. military posture may be restructured to take into account a denuclearized North Korea, ROK and U.S. forces would continue to prepare for other military contingencies which would presumably continue to be perceived as key threats by the DPRK.

Clearly, if North Korea really dismantled its nuclear arsenals under a credible inspection and verification regime such as through the IAEA and or with U.S.-led efforts, it would signal a major way forward for comprehensive confidence and security building measures between the two Koreas. Yet this leads back to the aforementioned conundrum; namely, that North Korea's insecurity presumably has not, and will continue not to be influenced by how North Korea perceives South Korea's not insignificant military capabilities. Even though years of intensive engagement under the rubric of Seoul's Sunshine Policy has altered South Korea's threat perceptions towards North Korea, Seoul has not abandoned its own defense requirements. This is particularly true with the advent of the conservative Lee Myung Bak government that came into office in February 2008 after a decade of left-of-center governments. Thus, in the event of unambiguous North Korean hostilities, the ROK armed forces would definitely choose to fight rather than surrender with the full might of its 670,000-strong armed forces. Regardless of Pyongyang's insistence that the United States is the overwhelming external threat, Kim Jong Il continues to worry about South Korea's increasingly robust conventional military capabilities. As a result, even if the North Korean nuclear threat is removed, the security dilemma between the two Koreas would continue to persist across the non-nuclear military spectrum.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Kim Jong Il's security concerns are highly unlikely to be dissipated even if the United States provides a water-tight security guarantee given that much of his insecurity stems from the abnormal, structural idiosyncracies of the regime, i.e., an intensely personalized communist dynasty. But the regime also imbues two other central features that are often skirted or ignored: a rogue regime that depends critically on the armed forces and the broader *nomenklatura* for political legitimacy and survival, and a mafia-like regime which in the past was actively behind state-sponsored terrorism and one which currently continues to earn hard currency through counterfeit schemes, drug trafficking, and other illicit activities.

In summary, although the final chapters on the North Korean and Iranian nuclear crises have yet to be written and prospects for a diplomatic settlement cannot be ruled out, the DPRK has already succeeded in becoming a virtual nuclear power. A combination of amplified political pressures, intensified sanction regimes, and very credible military threats may still convince Iran to rollback its nuclear weapons program. In the best of circumstances, the six countries that are coping with the Iranian nuclear crisis (P-5 and Germany) could provide sufficient incentives to the Iranian regime to desist it from pursuing a nuclear weapons program. Iran would cease all uranium enrichment activities and implement fully IAEA Safeguard Protocols. But if the North Korean nuclear saga can serve as a guide, Iran understands the payoffs and virtues of nuclear brinkmanship.

Whether Tehran chooses to emulate fully what Pyongyang has done is not nearly as important as the fact that Iran has already accrued key strategic benefits and insights from its nuclear cousin – North Korea – in full and clear defiance of the international community.



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- Ariel E. Levite, *Heading for the Fourth Nuclear Age*, Proliferation Papers n° 24, Ifri, Winter 2009  
[http://www.ifri.org/files/Securite\\_defense/Levite\\_Fourth\\_Nuclear\\_Age.pdf](http://www.ifri.org/files/Securite_defense/Levite_Fourth_Nuclear_Age.pdf)
- William Walker, *President-elect Obama and Nuclear Disarmament*, Proliferation Papers n° 23, Ifri, Winter 2009  
[http://www.ifri.org/files/Securite\\_defense/Walker\\_Obama\\_nuclear\\_disarmament.pdf](http://www.ifri.org/files/Securite_defense/Walker_Obama_nuclear_disarmament.pdf)
- George Perkovich, *Principle for Reforming the Nuclear Order*, Proliferation Papers n° 22, Ifri, Fall 2008  
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- Yury Fedorov, *New Wine in Old Bottles? The New Saliency of Nuclear Weapons*, Proliferation Papers, n° 20, Paris, Ifri, Fall 2007  
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