

NORTH KOREA ' S " BOMBSHELL " DECLARATION

North Korea ' s declaration on February 10 that it had " manufactured nuclear weapons for self-defense " and would " suspend indefinitely " its participation in six-party talks is a stunning development that serves to escalate the 28-month-old standoff between the North and its adversaries to a dangerous level. What makes this " bombshell " declaration special is that it marked the first official confirmation of what Pyongyang had previously intimated on several occasions during the past two years.(1)

Given the North ' s notable lack of credibility, however, one must not rule out the possibility that its professed nuclear capability may be but a mirage or a carefully-calculated tactical ploy. To gauge Pyongyang ' s probable intentions, then, one needs to scrutinize what the DPRK Foreign Ministry statement actually enumerated.

" The second Bush administration ' s intention to antagonize the DPRK and isolate and stifle it, " the statement declares, " has become crystal clear. " As the basis for this conclusion, the North cites both an absence of any indication that a change of policy is in the offing and, more ominously from its perspective, Bush ' s avowed goal of ending " tyranny " in the world, coupled with Condoleezza Rice ' s branding of North Korea as an " outpost of tyranny. " To the North, this lays bare the true, unchanging goal of U.S. policy vis-`-vis the DPRK -- namely, regime change.(2)

Washington ' s pursuit of two contradictory goals, that is to say, a " peaceful, diplomatic resolution " of the nuclear issue on the one hand and regime change on the other, the North Korean statement asserts, betrays the duplicitous, double-dealing behavior of the United States and a " robber ' s logic. " For its part, the statement continues, the North had made clear its willingness to " treat the U.S. as a friend, resolve the nuclear issue, and improve bilateral relations so long as the U.S. did not take issue with our system and refrained from interfering in our internal affairs. " Taking this as a weakness, however, the United States hurled insults at " our dignified system chosen by our people and ferociously interfered in our internal affairs, " the statement alleges.

Under these circumstances, the North feels “compelled to suspend our participation in six-party talks for an indefinite period until we have recognized that there is justification [myongbun] for us to return to them and conditions and an atmosphere have been created to expect positive results from the talks.” The North’s nuclear weapons, which it claims to have manufactured “in order to protect its ideology, system, and freedom and democracy chosen by its people” against U.S. nuclear threat, “will remain nuclear deterrent for self-defense under any circumstances.” “The DPRK’s principled stand,” nonetheless, is “to solve the issue through dialogue and negotiations and its ultimate goal to keep the Korean Peninsula free from nuclear weapons remains unchanged.”

Significantly, the North has left open the possibility that it may yet return to six-party talks. Whether that will actually happen will hinge on whether the North can recognize a justification (myongbun) for doing so or, alternatively, whether the North can see some improvement in the “atmosphere and conditions” that leads it to “expect positive results from the talks.” By reaffirming its twin commitments to “solve the [nuclear] issue through dialogue and negotiations” and to keep the Korean Peninsula free from nuclear weapons,” moreover, the North has signaled a willingness to resume negotiations, either bilateral or multilateral.

In short, the North’s “bombshell” declaration exemplifies brinkmanship par excellence, a tactic the North has used with considerable finesse and skill in the past. The best example of this is the North’s declaration of its intention to withdraw from the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in March 1993. Then as now the North left the door open for reversing its decision, which paved the way for high-level talks between the DPRK and the United States, culminating in the signing of the Agreed Framework in October 2004.

The operational environment the North faces today, however, is vastly different from what it had to deal with in the early 1990s. Not only does Pyongyang confront the George W. Bush administration in Washington, which has vowed never to reward bad behavior, but in the six-party process Pyongyang cannot really count on unstinting support of any country, not even its only ally in a military sense and most important benefactor, Beijing. China, nonetheless, happens to be the only country that has any leverage over the North, which is why the United States, South Korea, and Japan all looked to Beijing for help. As the principal sponsor as well as the host of the three

previous rounds of the six-party talks, China has a huge stake in preventing the process from falling apart. What is more, China's stake in a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula is as great as, if not greater than, that shared by the other participants in the talks.

Against this backdrop, China dispatched Wang Jiarui, head of the international liaison department of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC), to Pyongyang on February 19 on a four-day visit. Although Wang did not see Kim Jong Il during the first two days of his visit, managing to talk only with North Korea's second-ranking leader, Kim Yong Nam, the president of the presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, Wang was carrying a "verbal message" from Chinese president and CPC general secretary Hu Jintao to Kim Jong Il, which ensured that the North's supreme leader would "receive" Wang. The statements released by both sides after their February 21 meeting revealed the following:(3)

Kim Jong Il told Wang that the North was as committed as ever to the goal of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and to a peaceful solution of the nuclear issue through dialogue. Kim noted that the "DPRK has never opposed the six-party talks but made every possible effort for their success," adding that "we will go to the negotiating table anytime if there are mature conditions for the six-party talks thanks to the concerted efforts of the parties concerned in the future." Kim expressed hope that the United States would show "trustworthy sincerity" and act accordingly.

In a strict sense, Kim Jong Il did not say anything new to Wang but merely reiterated the main points of the foreign ministry statement of February 10. In another sense, however, he made explicit what had been implicit in the latter statement -- namely, the North is prepared to return to the six-party talks when and if conditions favorable to the North, as it sees them, materialize. Kim made it plain that the ball was in the United States' court, which must display "sincerity" backed by concrete action. If a report in the Japanese press is to be believed, however, the positive spin in Kim's words did not come easily. Initially, Kim reportedly had dismissed the six-party talks as "meaningless" in the absence of any signs of change in U.S. policy toward the North in the second Bush administration. Only after Wang conveyed to Kim China's strong opposition to the North's acquisition of nuclear weapons and spent many hours trying to change Kim's mind did Wang succeed in extracting a statement that was flexible enough to suggest the possibility of the North's returning to the

conference table.(4)

In a press briefing on the Wang-Kim meeting, PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan put a slightly different twist to Kim Jong Il 's demand for sincerity on the part of the United States. Not once but twice Kong underscored the need for "all parties" to "show sincerity, flexibility and patience, and make concerted efforts" to solve the nuclear issue. Even when he was specifically asked whether China would ask the United States to change its attitude in response to North Korea 's demand for "sincerity," Kong sounded strikingly even-handed: "both sides can be sincere and flexible, can take into consideration the concerns of the other party, especially the problems the other party urges to be solved." (5)

How did the United States, South Korea, and Japan respond to the outcome of the latest round of Chinese diplomacy? On February 26, the three allies -- or, in the case of South Korea and Japan, quasi-allies -- held a meeting in Seoul to hammer out a common strategy. The meeting marked the first time that the three countries ' chief delegates to the six-party talks got together, for all of them had been newly appointed to that position; they were Christopher Hill, the U.S. ambassador to Seoul, ROK Deputy Foreign Minister Song Min Soon, and Sasae Kenichiro, the director-general of the Japanese Foreign Ministry 's Asia-Oceania bureau. They urged North Korea to return to the six-party talks "without delay," indicating that they were willing to discuss "all issues" the North wanted to include. They would not, however, offer the North "any rewards before negotiations resume." Since only Song and Sasae talked to reporters about the four-hour-long trilateral meeting, however, only the bottom line was revealed.(6) It was nonetheless plain that the three parties were not as united as they tried to appear. South Korea sounded more upbeat than the other parties, with Song describing the outlook as "sunny." A South Korean paper speculated that Japan may have advocated a harder line than the United States.(7) Even before Pyongyang 's February 10 declaration, for example, the option of imposing sanctions on the North was being seriously debated in Japan in response to the North 's lack of sincerity or outright duplicity with respect to the abduction issue. The North 's February 10 statement, in fact, mentioned Japan 's "hostile" policy toward the DPRK as one of the reasons why it would boycott the six-party talks.

Given the North's track record, one cannot be sanguine about the chance of its heeding the demand of the U.S. and its two allies to return to the six-party talks before any reward is given. Is there, then, any chance that China will provide economic inducements to the North in order to jump-start the talks, as it has done in the past? Its high stakes in keeping the Korean Peninsula nuclear weapons-free notwithstanding, the Chinese, according to a New York Times report, "remain reluctant to take major diplomatic risks on North Korea, convinced that this longtime ally, a country that Chinese soldiers shed blood in large numbers to defend, will never turn against them." According to some Chinese analysts, "Beijing's top priority is to maintain quiet on its frontier, and..it would take a more aggressive tack only if tensions between Washington and North Korea were to increase seriously." (8)

The report goes on to cite "an even more fundamental reason for the reluctance of China to take the lead in this crisis: its deep-seated skepticism about the United States' strategic designs in the region." In the words of one analyst, "if we cut off aid and the Koreans are unified on South Korean terms, that would be a big disaster for China." "The U.S. would insist on basing its troops in the northern part of the peninsula, and China would have to consider that all of its efforts going back to the Korean War have been a waste." (9)

If the North Korean claim that it possesses nuclear weapons is true, then that would be a serious matter for China. As one Chinese analyst put it, that development "might lead to nuclear competition in Northeast Asia, which is the most important region in the world for China. . . . We must treat this with the greatest seriousness." (10) A big question, then, is what does China know about the North Korean claim? China reportedly let the United States know that North Korea's February 10 declaration had caused "profound anger" in Beijing.(11)

When PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan was asked at a news conference on February 22 whether China believed the DPRK has nuclear weapons, he equivocated: The question, he said, is "too demanding, for that is the very problem that the six-party talks [have sought] to solve over the last two years. If you insist on knowing the answer, please use your pen to tell the international community that we hope the six parties can make concerted efforts . . . to support the early resumption of the six-party talks." (12)

Although North Korea is known to have extracted sufficient amount of weapons-grade plutonium from spent fuel rods removed from its 5 mega-watt experimental reactor in Yongbyon, no one outside of Pyongyang 's inner circle has a way of knowing for sure whether the plutonium has actually been turned into weapons. The North, moreover, has never tested a bomb. Even if one assumes that it has succeeded in making a few or several bombs, none of them is likely to be small enough -- that is, less than 1 ton -- to be carried by ballistic missiles.

One encouraging development is that on February 27 in Beijing, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei told Sasae, Japan 's chief delegate to six-party talks, that China "will make diplomatic efforts [to bring North Korea back to the conference table] with a sense of urgency." Wu also expressed China 's hope that "Japan, South Korea, and the United States will make efforts as well." (13)

What North Korea seeks desperately is an assurance of "no hostile intent" from the United States. Actually, the North did obtain such assurance in October 2000, when Vice Marshal Jo Myong Rok visited Washington and met with the then President Bill Clinton and other officials. A joint communique issued at the end of the visit declared that "as a crucial first step, the two sides stated that neither government would have hostile intent toward the other." (14) The advent of the George W. Bush administration, however, effectively nullified that communique, along with other legacies of the Clinton era. What is more, Bush 's inclusion of North Korea in "an axis of evil" in his 2002 state of union address, coupled with other acts -- notably, the designation of the North as a potential target of nuclear preemptive attack in Washington 's nuclear posture review and his remarks derogatory of its supreme leader, Kim Jong Il, on numerous occasions -- has convinced Pyongyang that hostility is the hallmark of Bush 's North Korea policy.

Inasmuch as Washington 's perceived hostility undermines its sense of security, Pyongyang never ceases to call on the former to jettison it. What, then, does the phrase "no hostile intent" mean for the North? "For North Korean leaders, diplomats say, the phrase goes beyond a pledge not to invade, conveying an implicit message of respect between two peer nations." As Wendy Sherman, "a former top State Department official who was the chief U.S. negotiator" of the October 2000 joint communique noted above, put it, "ultimately, it is about regime survival." That is why the North is not mollified by Bush 's repeated disavowal of any intention of

invading or attacking North Korea. For Bush by implication and sometimes explicitly has left on the table the other options that carry hostile intent in North Korean eyes -- such as economic sanctions and interdiction of ships and aircraft originating in or bound for the North (as part of the Proliferation Security Initiative).(15)

Returning to the North's January 10 declaration, one can see that the Bush administration's "hostile" rhetoric the North cites may indeed have deepened North Korean leaders' sense of insecurity; for Bush's pledge to work toward the elimination of "tyranny" in the world, when read in conjunction with Rice's designation of North Korea as an "outpost of tyranny," can logically be construed as an indirect pledge to bring the Pyongyang regime to an end. From a tactical standpoint, then, Washington's rhetoric may have been counterproductive insofar as the goal of nonproliferation is concerned.

Just as the United States will not retreat from its position of not offering any rewards to North Korea in order to entice it back to the six-party talks, a position reconfirmed at the trilateral consultation meeting in Seoul on February 26, so the North is exceedingly unlikely to heed the demand of the United States and its two allies to return to the talks "without delay" in the absence of any face-saving inducement. The sense of urgency with which China has promised to make diplomatic efforts, however, raises the hope that a compromise can be found. A feasible scenario is for China to offer the North an additional aid of sizable proportions, while simultaneously conveying to Pyongyang credible signals from the United States that the kind of security assurances the North seeks, including a pledge of no hostile intent, is within reach once the six-party talks resume. This may necessitate some assurance that "informal bilateral contacts" between the North and the United States in the context of the six-party talks will be more substantial than has been the case in the preceding three rounds. It is possible that the Bush administration may equate even such informal signals conveyed indirectly by the Chinese intermediary with rewards. It is equally possible that the Bush administration is truly averse to signing on to a "no hostile intent" pledge even in exchange for the North's commitment to dismantle all of its nuclear weapons programs in a verifiable and irreversible manner. These possibilities imply that there may not be an easy way out of the monumental dilemma the North's "bombshell" declaration has spawned. / B. C. Koh (University of Illinois at Chicago)

[NOTES]

1) In April 2003, North Korea's chief delegate to the Three-Party talks involving the DPRK, the U.S., and China, told his U.S. counterpart on the sidelines of the talks, that his country possessed nuclear weapons and could conduct a test to prove it or even export them to a third country, depending on U.S. policy. Four months later, when the first round of Six-Party talks convened in Beijing, North Korea's chief delegate repeated the allegation to his U.S. counterpart during unofficial bilateral contacts on the sidelines of the official sessions. At the third round of the six-party talks held in Beijing in June 2004, North Korea's chief delegate stated that his country would "no longer manufacture, export, or test nuclear weapons." In September of the same year, a North Korean foreign vice-minister told correspondents at the United Nations that his country had "already reprocessed 8,000 fuel rods, turning them into weapons." See Chosun ilbo, February 11, 2005.

2) "Choson oemusong 2-gi Busi haengjongbu ui tae-Choson choktaesi chongch'ae e taehan ripjang ch'onmyong, 6-ja hoedam ch'amga rul mugihan chungdan" [DPRK Foreign Ministry Clarifies Its Position on the Second Bush Administration's Hostile Policy toward the DPRK; Indefinitely Suspends Participation in Six-party Talks], Choson chungang t'ongsin [Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)], Pyongyang, February 10, 2005, online at www.kcna.co.jp/calendar/2005/02/02-11/2005-02-11-001.html. An English translation of excerpts from this statement is available online at www.kcna.co.jp/item/2005/200502/news02/11.htm.

3) "Kim Jong Il ch'ongbiso Chungguk kongsangdang taeoe yollak pujang ul chopgyon" [General Secretary Kim Jong Il Receives CPC International Liaison Department Head], Choson chungang t'ongsin [KCNA], Pyongyang, February 22, 2005, online at www.kcna.co.jp/calendar/2005/02/02-22/2005-02-22-001.html; "Kim Jong Il Receives Head of International Liaison Department of CC., CPC," KCNA, Pyongyang, February 22, 2005, online at www.kcna.co.jp/item/2005/200502/news02/22.htm; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, Foreign Ministry Spokesman Kong Quan's Press Conference on 22 February 2005 (Beijing: February 23, 2005), online at www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t184390.htm.

4) “ Kim soshoki ‘ 6-kakoku imi nai ’ Chucho kadan de hatsugen ” [General Secretary Kim Said “ Six-Party Talks Meaningless ” During China-DPRK Talks], Yomiuri shinbun (Tokyo), February 26, 2005, online at www.yomiuri.co.jp/world/news/20050225i316.htm. The source of this information is Ambassador Ning Fukui in charge of the Korean Peninsula affairs, who briefed Japanese officials on Wang ’ s visit to North Korea. Ning was a member of the Chinese delegation headed by Wang Jiarui.

5) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, Foreign Ministry Spokesman Kong Quan ’ s Press Conference...[cited in Endnote 3 above].

6) Sang-Hun Choe, “ North Korea Urged to Resume Talks Now, ” Washington Post, February 26, 2005, online at www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A55276-2005Feb26?language=printer.

7) “ Pukhaek taeung 3-guk ‘ ondoch ’ a ’ ..Il kanggyong kiryu tolch ’ ul ” [Temperatures Differ Among 3 Countries on How to Deal With North ’ s Nuclear Weapons, Japan Displays Hard Line], Maeil kyongje [Everyday Economy] (Seoul), February 27, 2005, online at inews.mk.co.kr/CMS/include/template/sendPrint.php.

8) Howard French, “ China Uneasy In Korea Role, Wary of U.S., ” New York Times, February 19, 2005, p. A1.

9) Ibid., p. A1 and p. A6.

10) Ibid., p. A6.

11) “ Kita Chosen no uran noshuku keikaku, Chugokuga itten ‘ sonzai suru ’ , ” [China Turns Around on North Korea ’ s Uranium Enrichment Program, “ It Exists ”], Asahi shinbun (Tokyo), February 27, 2005, online at www.asahi.com/international/update/0227/001.html.

12) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, Foreign Ministry Spokesman Kong Quan ’ s Press Conference.

13) “ China Promises Efforts With ‘ Urgency ’ Over N. Korea, ” Yahoo! News Asia , February 27, 2005, on line at asia.news.yahoo.com/050227/Kyoto/d88gr8t00.html

14) Glenn Kessler, "Three Little Words Matter to N. Korea," Washington Post, February 22, 2005, p. A10, online at www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A42357-2005Feb21?language=printer.

15) Ibid.

< : IFES 2005. 3. 2 >