

The Korean Nuclear Problem--Idealism versus Realism

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Perceptions of a problem often outline possible solutions. This is certainly applicable to the nuclear proliferation problem on the Korean peninsula. Despite the problem's persistence since the early 1980s, a viable solution remains elusive. A contributing factor may be the inability of the most concerned nations--the two Koreas, China, Japan, Russia and the United States--to agree on the problem's origins and nature. Absent such a consensus, formulating a mutually acceptable solution is virtually impossible.

More than two years of intense diplomacy since October 2002, has forged a consensus about some related issues. The two Koreas and the four superpowers agree to the need for a diplomatic solution achieved via diplomatic dialogue. Thus they came together in June 2003 to initiate the diplomatic process named the Six Party Talks. Unfortunately, the process has stalled and prospects for the talks' resumption remain uncertain. The situation is not yet approaching a crisis, but so long as the Six Party Talks remained stalled and a diplomatic solution elusive, a second Korean War will persist as a realistic possibility.

The Lingering Possibility--a Second Korean War

A second Korean War would be catastrophic not just for South and North Korea, but all the nations of Northeast Asia, particularly Japan and China. The impact, moreover, would be felt around the world, particularly for the United States and Russia. Geography and technology limited the impact of the first Korean War, 1950-53. The people of Korea, both North and South, endured three years of intense bombing and combat that killed and injured millions of Koreans, destroyed their homes, cities, economic infrastructure and severely disrupted their lives.

If hostilities erupt again on the Korean peninsula, Koreans would inevitably pay the heaviest price. But the Japanese people could also suffer terribly. North Korea now has the capability to launch ballistic missiles against Japanese cities and U.S. military installations in Japan. Acts of sabotage and terrorism by North Korean agents would be highly possible. Undoubtedly the United States would become involved, followed by China and Russia.

Equally worrisome is the potential disruption to the international economy. Northeast Asia today is the most economically dynamic region in the world. Japan ranks second in the world economy behind the United States. South Korea has leaped from the poverty of the Korean War era to the world's eleventh largest trading nation. China is rushing to catch up to both Japan and South Korea. War on the Korean peninsula would disrupt worldwide trade, production and communications.

As for North Korea, it lingers as one of the world's poorest nations. War most likely would result in its defeat. This might facilitate the Korean people's long quest for national unification. The cost to the Korean people, both because of the war and the subsequent reconstruction effort, would be enormous. Also, intense effort would be required to restore trust between the inhabitants of the two Koreas.

Realistically speaking, war is not a viable option to a diplomatic resolution of the Korean nuclear problem. On this all the nations of Northeast Asia, plus Russia and the United States, concur. Nevertheless, a diplomatic solution continues to elude them. One obvious impediment is the continuing clash between Washington and Pyongyang over the motives behind North Korea's quest for a nuclear arsenal. Until this gap is closed, a negotiated solution will remain impossible.

Washington versus Pyongyang

Since 2001, the United States and North Korea have engaged in intense verbal dueling over who is responsible for the Korean peninsula's nuclear proliferation problem. President George W. Bush points the finger at North Korea. For him, the responsibility lies with North Korea's leaders. He has labeled North Korea a member of the "axis of evil," declared it a threat to world peace and a potential ally of international terrorists. President Bush has also judged Kim Jong Il to be a "tyrant" and blamed him for the starvation of North Koreans while building a nuclear arsenal to perpetuate his regime.

The Bush administration is also convinced that the secondary motive for Kim's nuclear quest is his regime's survival. It ties this motive to Pyongyang's dire economic situation. Some in the Bush administration have gone so far as to allege that Kim Jong Il might even try to sustain his regime by exporting for profit fissile nuclear materials to terrorist organizations, as well as other contraband such as drugs.

President Bush's strategy for dealing with North Korea clearly appears rooted in the idealism of Christian morality. For President Bush, the U.S. is engaged in a campaign not just against weapons of mass destruction, but in an effort to ensure that good

overcomes evil. In other words, North Korea's evil leaders threaten world peace with weapons of mass destruction to perpetuate their ruthless tyranny. Bush's moralistic idealism appears aimed more at rallying domestic political support for his refusal to engage North Korea in diplomatic negotiations. At the same time, it is aimed at isolating North Korea from the international community. This strategy reflects the assumption that North Korea will inevitably collapse if it is denied commercial and diplomatic access to other nations.

Thus far, President Bush's strategy has fallen short of its goals. Achieving a diplomatic solution to the nuclear problem, Bush's avowed goal, remains a distant hope. Similarly, North Korea today appears to be successfully distancing itself from collapse, either economic or political. Meanwhile, North Korea has responded to President Bush's strategy by labeling it a "hostile" policy designed to topple the Kim Jong Il regime. Pyongyang matches Washington's adamant refusal to engage it diplomatically by just as adamantly rejecting Bush's demands that North Korea unilaterally disarm.

Washington's inflexibility, more than Pyongyang's allegations against the United States, appears to have convinced Beijing and Moscow that Washington more than Pyongyang should demonstrate more flexibility. Seoul shares a similar concern. Tokyo has positioned itself between Washington and Seoul. Pyongyang, with Washington's unwitting assistance, has successfully neutralized the multilateral pressure that Washington believes will compel Kim Jong Il to disarm. The sum result is a deadlock in the Six Party Talks.

Idealism versus Realism

Taking a more realistic view of the situation could help break the stalemate. It is generally accepted that national interests drive a nation's foreign policy. For all nations, defense of a nation's sovereignty is every government's primary national interest and foremost concern. This premise is the foundation of "realism" in foreign policy. Accordingly, the governments of South and North Korea share with each other and the United States this similar view.

Both Koreas since the end of the first Korean War in 1953 have accented "deterrence" as their preferred defense strategy. Armed deterrence was the strategy that the two nuclear superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, forged as their mutually acceptable form of national self defense during the cold war. The two Koreas followed the example of their superpower champions. Their deterrence's strategy was designed to discourage all assaults on their own sovereign territory by maintaining a dual military

capability that was anchored in the possession of a formidable conventional force backed by ties to an even more powerful ally.

All U.S. presidential administrations, particularly that of George W. Bush, formulate their nation's foreign policy and defense strategy with this premise in mind. President Bush has accented the United States' sovereign right of "pre-emptive" counter proliferation regarding any threat, conventional or nuclear, from another nation or terrorist organization. In this regard, President Bush has gone so far as to push aside international arms control treaties, such as the anti-ballistic missile treaty with Russia, to assert the U.S. determination to possess a self-reliant deterrence capability.

Reality on the Korean Peninsula

For the two Koreas, deterrence meant aligning themselves with the United States, in the case of South Korea, and the Soviet Union for North Korea. Paradoxically, both Koreas ever since have shared a common concern about the United States regarding their national defense. Neither trusts the United States, but for different reasons. North Korea sees the United States as its worst enemy and most potent threat to its sovereignty and survival. South Korea likewise distrusts the United States. But while Seoul sees the United States as its foremost ally, it fears that the United States might abandon and undermine South Korea's ability to deter another North Korean attack as happened in 1950. Their common concern has motivated both Koreas to pursue the "ultimate" self-reliant defense posture--a combination of conventional and nuclear deterrence capabilities.

The two Koreas were able to sustain military parity, the most essential feature of deterrence, until the late 1980s. During that decade, South Korea economically leaped ahead of North Korea just as it began to slide into a severe economic depression. The Soviet Union's collapse in 1990 discontinued its nuclear umbrella over North Korea. A year later, U.S. military forces quickly and easily destroyed the Soviet equipped Iraqi Army in the first Gulf War. This rendered North Korea's entire massive conventional military force obsolete since all of its equipment was of Soviet origin. Then Beijing normalized diplomatic and commercial relations with North Korea's worse enemy, South Korea.

North Korea's leadership abruptly found their economically isolated and increasingly impoverished nation exposed to possible attack from South Korea and the United States. Pyongyang faced the challenge of quickly restoring its deterrence capability vis a vis South Korea. Obviously, it no longer could rely on either Moscow or Beijing for help in

this regard. Nor could its declining economy afford the enormous cost of replacing Pyongyang's outdated conventional arsenal with modern equipment.

Pyongyang's leadership appears to have determined that it had two options. Either it could radically alter its network of international relations or it would build a nuclear arsenal. It chose to pursue the normalization of relations first with Japan and then the United States. By 1994, the U.S.-North Korea Agreed Framework seemed to offer North Korea a new formula for security. In exchange for U.S. security assurances, economic benefits and the promise of normalized diplomatic relations, Pyongyang agreed to suspend its pursuit of a nuclear deterrence capability. But when this option appeared to falter in the late 1990s, Pyongyang reverted to "plan B," the creation of its own "self-reliant" nuclear deterrence capability. In short, Pyongyang's concerns about national security, the preservation of military parity and its deterrence capability appear to be the prime motives behind Kim Jong Il's nuclear ambitions.

Not surprisingly, when viewing the situation on the Korean Peninsula in realistic terms, South Korea has also pursued its own nuclear capability. It has done so in spurts through secret, small scale and sometimes clandestine nuclear experiments. The main difference with North Korea is that South Korea remains a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), generally complies with all its obligations under the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and allows regular IAEA inspections. North Korea does none of these things. So long as South Korea is confident that the United States will sustain its nuclear umbrella over it, the government in Seoul can be trusted to restrain those South Koreans who advocate a "self-reliant" nuclear deterrence capability.

A Time for Realism

The Bush administration would do well to shelve its preoccupation with idealistic morality. This moralistic approach is a consequence of cold-war propaganda when the United States felt compelled to champion "democratic capitalism" over "authoritarian communism." Today, the problem is how to halt nuclear proliferation, not to compete for moral supremacy. Morality is irrelevant when confronting the reality of nuclear weapons.

Similarly, Kim Jong Il and his advisers must adopt a more realistic perspective of the current impasse. Possession of a nuclear deterrence capability can never ensure their regime's security. On the contrary, it will only perpetuate the possibility of a second Korean War. Nor can U.S. flexibility alone break the current impasse in the Six Party

Talks. Pyongyang must also take concrete steps to convince not just Washington, but the entire international community, that it will in fact completely and irreversibly give up its nuclear ambitions and current capability. As a first step, North Korea needs to return to the NPT and allow the resumption of IAEA inspections.

Only then would it become politically possible for the United States to pursue a realistic solution to the Korean nuclear problem. That solution must be rooted in diplomacy which, by definition, requires negotiations and concessions on all sides. The United States, Japan, China and Russia should join together to present both Koreas a two-phase package deal.

First, they could offer comprehensive security assurances to both Koreas. This would require that the four superpower pledge not to engage in military hostilities on the Korean peninsula. The two Koreas, in other words, could no longer seek outside military support in the event of armed clashes between them. Also, the two Koreas mutual defense treaties would have to be replaced by a multilateral peace treaty that ends the Korean War and formalizes the multilateral security assurances.

In exchange for these assurances, both Koreas would commit to fulfilling all the terms of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and related safeguards agreements. They would pledge full cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Seoul and Pyongyang would also engage in the phased reduction of their conventional arsenals and armed forces to mutually acceptable levels.

Additionally, the international community, particularly the United States, Japan, China and Russia, would formulate a “Marshall Plan” to assist South Korea in implementing its policy of economic cooperation with North Korea. The plan’s priorities would be to reorient North Korea’s economy from one dominated by military to civilian production. North Korea’s economy would be linked to the international market. Disbursement of the plan’s funds would be linked to progress toward disarmament and the extent of compliance with nuclear safeguard commitments.

After all, the two Koreas seek the same things--reconciliation, peace, prosperity and stability on the Korean peninsula. This process, however, cannot commence until Washington and Pyongyang adopt a more realistic assessment of the current impasse over the Korean peninsula’s nuclear issue.