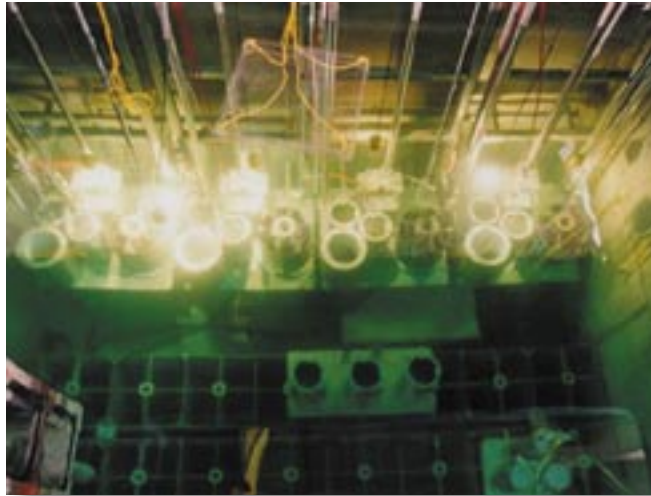


NORTH KOREA

A Rogue State Outside the NPT Fold

RALPH C. HASSIG AND KONGDAN OH



Problems with North Korea over nuclear proliferation are nothing new, say Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh. The regime started building nuclear reactors in the 1960s and did not join the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty until 1985. It announced in the early 1990s that it was withdrawing from the treaty, but suspended its withdrawal one day before it became effective. Then came the period under the Agreed Framework, which collapsed in 2002.

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The government of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK)—or North Korea—has never been in full compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which it acceded in 1985. The signing of a safeguards agreement that would permit International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections of its nuclear program was postponed until 1992. When the overdue inspections suggested that the North Koreans were hiding nuclear material, the DPRK became the first country to announce its withdrawal from the NPT. Thanks to persuasion from the United States, in 1993 that withdrawal was “suspended” one day before it became effective. But under the Agreed Framework that North Korea negotiated with the United States in 1994, the IAEA was prevented from conducting the inspections it had requested. When the Agreed Framework finally collapsed in late 2002, North Korea pulled out of the NPT and the IAEA and boasted that it had begun building a nuclear deterrent.

North Korea’s nuclear program began in the mid-1950s, when a group of North Korean nuclear scientists received training in the Soviet Union. In the mid-1960s North Korea built two small nuclear research reactors with Soviet assistance and technology. Another nuclear reactor, generating five megawatts of electricity, was completed in 1986. [Editor’s note: According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, such a plant could generate

Photo above: This 1996 file photo shows spent nuclear fuel rods in a cooling pond at facilities in Yongbyon, North Korea. The photo was released in 2003 by the South Korean news agency, Yonhap. (AP Wide World Photos/Yonhap)

enough electricity to service about 4,000 U.S. households for a full year, if operated at full power continuously.] Although this reactor was too small to be connected to an electrical power grid, its spent fuel began to be reprocessed into weapons-grade plutonium—a clear violation of North Korea's NPT obligations. In 1984, construction began on a 50-megawatt reactor, and in 1991, on a 200-megawatt reactor, neither of which was ever completed. In the 1980s, the Soviets agreed to construct a light-water reactor (LWR) capable of generating 1,760 megawatts of electricity on the condition that the North Koreans join the NPT. Work stopped at an early stage when the North Koreans fell behind in their payments.

Under the 1994 Agreed Framework with the United States, North Korea's 5-megawatt reactor as well as its fuel reprocessing plant and associated facilities at Yongbyon were shut down, and construction on the 50-megawatt and 200-megawatt reactors was halted. The IAEA monitored the shut-down but was not permitted to conduct a complete investigation of North Korea's nuclear program until two 1,000 megawatt light-water reactors, to be built by a new consortium called the Korean Peninsula Development Organization, were well on their way to completion. The reactors would be constructed by the South Koreans, based on U.S. designs, and financed largely by South Korea and Japan. Light-water reactors are more "proliferation-resistant" than North Korea's gas-graphite reactors because the former require enriched uranium for fuel and, under normal operating conditions, the spent fuel produced by light-water reactors could not be reprocessed into weapons-grade plutonium with North Korea's present technology.

CALLED TO ACCOUNT

For a variety of reasons, construction on the two reactors, originally expected to be completed by 2003, fell far behind schedule. In the meantime, U.S. intelligence came to believe that the North Koreans were developing a clandestine uranium-enrichment program; such a program would be contrary to the North-South Denuclearization Declaration and therefore would violate the Agreed Framework. Called to account in an October 2002 meeting between the two governments, a North Korean official admitted the existence of the uranium program, but later denied the admission. The following month, the United States announced it was halting shipments of the half-million tons of heavy fuel oil it had been providing annually to North Korea as compensation for "lost" energy generating capacity. In December 2002, the North Koreans

expelled IAEA inspectors and removed IAEA seals and cameras from Yongbyon. In January 2003, the North Koreans announced that they had lifted their earlier "suspension" of their withdrawal from the NPT and asserted that their withdrawal was therefore effective the next day. They re-started their 5-megawatt reactor and later claimed that they had completed reprocessing the reactor's 8,000 spent fuel rods that had been under IAEA seal. Construction of the two light-water reactors, still at the foundation stage, was suspended in November 2003.

From fuel reprocessed before the Agreed Framework took effect in 1994, the North Koreans are thought to have accumulated at least 6-to-10 kilograms of plutonium, sufficient for one or two small nuclear bombs. Another half-dozen nuclear devices could be constructed from the estimated 20-35 kilograms of plutonium reprocessed from the 8,000 spent fuel rods. In a few years, when fuel can be unloaded from the re-started 5-megawatt reactor and reprocessed into plutonium, sufficient plutonium for one additional nuclear device a year could become available. If the 50-megawatt reactor is ever completed, it could—eventually—produce enough plutonium for 5-to-10 weapons a year, and of course the 200-megawatt reactor could produce even more. The output of North Korea's alleged uranium enrichment program is purely speculative because the scope of that program is unknown. Yet another possible source of nuclear material or ready-made weapons would be purchases from other countries or through a clandestine proliferation network.

The first U.S.-DPRK talks of substance convened in 1993 and continued on a stop-and-go basis into 1994, culminating in the signing of the Agreed Framework. Six four-party meetings (U.S., DPRK, South Korea, and China) were held between 1997 and 1999 to discuss North Korea's demand that the Korean War armistice be replaced by a peace treaty, but the talks eventually collapsed.

In April 2003, in the face of a U.S. refusal to meet bilaterally with North Korea, China played the host and arranged a three-party meeting, which expanded into a six-party forum (adding South Korea, Japan and Russia) for three six-party meetings beginning in August 2003.

In the six-party meetings, North Korea has offered to freeze its nuclear weapons program as soon as the United States resumes its fuel oil deliveries, lifts its economic embargo, and removes the DPRK from Washington's list of terrorist-sponsoring states. Learning from its experience with the Agreed Framework, the United States has insisted that only when North Korea verifiably freezes its nuclear program can the U.S. begin negotiating an economic aid package and a multilateral non-aggression pact.



AP Wide World Photos

The art of making threats. Showing missiles demolishing the U.S. Capitol building, the poster above was mounted on a shoe-factory wall in the North Korean city of Sinuiju. The text vows to “crush” the United States “if someone starts an invasion war.” The poster below is titled “The Targets are Clear” and depicts North Korean missiles closing in on a plane bearing the markings “Washington, Seoul, Tokyo.”



AP Wide World Photos/Korea News Service

North Korea’s neighbors—China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea—have on many occasions declared that they will not tolerate a North Korean nuclear weapons program. The United States has voiced its unalterable opposition as well. Yet no one has been able to stop North Korea from accumulating more nuclear material, and presumably building nuclear weapons. The Agreed Framework, negotiated by the Clinton administration, slowed but did not stop North Korea’s nuclear program. The Bush administration has avoided one-on-one talks because it considers North Korea’s proliferation to be a regional rather than bilateral issue, but the United States has agreed to meet with North Korea in a multilateral setting. Washington’s initial expectation was that the other members of the six-party talks would join the United States in pressuring North Korea to halt its nuclear program. What has happened in our view, however, is that Russia, China, and South Korea have shown a degree of sympathy for North Korea’s claim that it is a target of U.S. aggression in the Bush administration’s war on terrorism. These countries have called on the United States to compromise with North Korea, although no one has clearly laid out what that compromise would look like.

North Korea has offered to abandon its nuclear weapons program and accept an unspecified type of verification regime when the United States replaces its hostile policy toward the Kim Jong-il regime with acceptance, non-interference, and even support. But because U.S. policy is based not only on North Korea’s nuclear proliferation but also on its past behavior, its forward-deployed conventional weapons, and its abysmal human rights policies, there seems to be little prospect that any American administration would grant Kim Jong-il the respect and support he feels he deserves.

Most North Korea observers in the United States can agree that the North Koreans would stop producing more plutonium in return for a smorgasbord of rewards, but they doubt that “CVID” — a complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantling of North Korea’s entire nuclear program — could ever be accomplished as long as the Kim regime remains in power. So in practical terms, the issue becomes whether the U.S. will settle for another agreement that partially contains North Korea’s nuclear program, or whether the proliferation will be allowed to continue—at least until China, North Korea’s primary benefactor, becomes sufficiently alarmed to end its economic aid and diplomatic support for Kim’s regime. ■

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