

Strategic Insight

North Korea's Nuclear Acknowledgement: Motivations & Risks

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When North Korea acknowledged that American suspicions about its covert nuclear weapons agenda were warranted and admitted it has a clandestine uranium-enrichment program applicable to nuclear bombs, Pyongyang unleashed a major shift in East Asian regional affairs. The consequences of this revelation could be enormous and complicate U.S. policies toward Korea, its neighbors, and the world beyond.

Background

To better understand this situation it is essential to try to see the world from North Korea's perspective. North Korea's existence is a by-product of World War II dynamics that spawned the division of the Korean nation and the postwar's evolution into the Cold War that saw North Korea become a resolute member of the communist camp. As a result of these cumulative processes North Korea became a state with deep roots in authoritarian traditions dating from the Korean nation's pre-modern dynasties, through Japanese colonial oppression, to the brutal Stalinesque regime that persists as an anachronism into the post-Cold War era. This is a very authoritarian, hierarchical, and paternalistic society with strong echoes of Korea's "hermit kingdom" past. In short, it is an isolated country that sees itself as the true Korea in that it has been far less contaminated than has its southern neighbor by non-Korean socio-cultural forces. It is determined to deal with the outside world on its own terms and to maximize Korean sovereignty and autarky, both of which it thinks are endangered by globalization and the power of Western countries with the United States in the lead. However, it also is a country that is determined to cope with twenty first century pressures in its own way through idiosyncratic adaptations.

Against this backdrop, North Korea has actively pursued its brand of independence and has resisted foreign pressures to conform to external norms even as it adapts to them. It has been especially resistant to U.S. pressures to conform to international standards that Pyongyang sees as unduly shaped by U.S. interests. In particular, North Korea has actively pursued all viable means to defend itself against external threats, with the United States in the forefront from Pyongyang's vantage point. Accordingly, North Korea has resisted any efforts to weaken its capabilities and used all available means to overtly or covertly strengthen its defensive and offensive military capabilities. As the post-Cold War era materialized, North Korea found itself cut adrift from its former strategic ties with the Soviet Union and uncertain about the readiness of a China that was experimenting with capitalist economic reforms to support a fellow communist state. Beijing's willingness to explore its options with South Korea reinforced North Korea's pursuit of greater self-reliance through its emphasis on its *juche*-related programs. Consequently North Korea upped the ante by experimenting with new strategic options—including a nuclear option that had formerly been off limits due to constraints imposed by Moscow and Beijing— which led to more tensions with the United States. This effort by North Korea to strengthen its defenses almost produced preemptive U.S. military actions by the Clinton administration and did yield the 1994 U.S.-North Korean nuclear agreement that Pyongyang now has acknowledged violating.

Motivations for the Admission

While it obvious why North Korea would seek to keep its nuclear option intact covertly, North Korea's motivation for admitting this violation is unclear because the Pyongyang regime's decision-making is notably secretive and lacks transparency. Several possibilities are plausible. Underlying a set of economic, political, and military incentives are North Korea's psychological motivations. Given the Bush administration's willingness to lump North Korea together with Iraq and Iran into the so-called "axis of evil" that looms in the background of the United States' war on terrorism, the leaders in Pyongyang seem to think they have reason to fear being next in line after the United States deals with Iraq. Because North Korea's fears have a record of spurring reckless behaviors that to the United States and its allies in Northeast Asia often seem irrational, bordering on insanity, this adds another psychological dimension. Perversely, North Korea has at times exploited its adversaries' anxieties about its recklessness by behaving in manner calculated to exacerbate such apprehensions. Consequently North Korea's current fear of potential U.S. preemption may have motivated the leaders in Pyongyang to turn the tables and make use of others' fears as a way to start a new round of insecurity-motivated negotiations.

North Korea's desires for such negotiations on the economic front are palpable, stemming from its stagnating economic system, deadly famines, embarrassing refugee situation on the DPRK-PRC border, quest for internal reforms, and efforts to reach out to a number of external players. To North Korea the United States has been the primary impediment to this agenda and Pyongyang has had reasons to try to do something to break the American diplomatic log-jam that will lead to expanded U.S.-DPRK dialogue in diverse fields. The nuclear acknowledgement, and the controversy it has provoked, may well have been motivated by this economic-based need for change. What Pyongyang needed was something dramatic that would focus the United States' attention on North Korea and would exert pressures on the United States from Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing to do something innovative diplomatically. The nuclear acknowledgement served that purpose.

North Korea's motivations on the political front are less clear, but may be important. Arguably the most salient political motive involves South Korean politics, rather than North Korean. With ROK presidential elections on the horizon at year's end, and with polls suggesting President Kim Dae-jung will be succeeded by a more conservative leader perhaps amenable to U.S. harder line approaches to North Korea, Pyongyang had an incentive to take actions that could quickly generate a new round of talks aimed at furthering the North-South dialogue. Making a de facto concession on the nuclear front by admitting that it was engaged in covert actions helps to put that issue in the past and accelerates the dialogue process before President Kim leaves office. That constitutes a major political incentive for North Korea. The political dimensions of North Korea's diplomatic concerns about enhancing the dialogue process with South Korea, Japan, and other countries with which it has had considerable success that it would like to emulate on the U.S.-DPRK front also constituted a motive for making a bold acknowledgement / concession. Although it is unlikely to have been a conscious political motivation, the decision by Kim Jong-il and his closest advisors to acknowledge actions that they had to know would be very controversial and (as seen from abroad) could put their regime at risk by jeopardizing the progress they have achieved through international dialogue processes also demonstrated their confidence in their total political control over North Korea. There is virtually no risk (unlike Saddam Hussein's situation in Iraq) of internal opposition fomenting an effort to dislodge Kim Jong-il and company from political power in a state where the legacy of Kim Il-sung amounts to a deeply entrenched cult-like political culture that fully supports any decisions made by the regime—no matter how reckless they may seem to outsiders.

Militarily Pyongyang had reason to worry that the United States might apply its newly emphasized preemptive approach to North Korea. Whether or not such worries were warranted in terms of U.S. intentions is irrelevant. What matters is the possibility that North Korea may have believed it was likely. Beyond such concerns about U.S. military action against North Korea, Pyongyang had reason to worry that its deteriorated economy could not sustain a strong military over the longer term. Hence it made sense for North Korea to admit to what the United States had expressed concern over—the possibility that North Korea was violating the 1994 agreement—whether that acknowledgement was based on facts or was only saying what the North Koreans thought the United States would want to hear. In either case the admission would be more effective at transforming the dialogue process than was the previous tactic

of asserting that the United States had been violating the 1994 agreement by not doing as much as Pyongyang expected it to do.

Given North Korea's efforts to engage in a greater dialogue with its neighbors and to experiment with economic reforms, coupled with the possibility that Pyongyang may fear that U.S. policy toward Iraq could be applied to North Korea next, this may simply have been its way to concede and open its doors to an expanded dialogue. Such a provocative approach to diplomacy is in keeping with North Korea's notions of compromise, evidenced by Pyongyang's dealings with Seoul and Tokyo in recent years. Pyongyang's record of diplomatic brinkmanship also suggests that acknowledging a covert nuclear program could be its way of exerting greater leverage over U.S. hard liners. The hard liners have tried to exert pressure on North Korea by questioning the viability of the 1994 nuclear agreement and raising charges that the United States had appeased the DPRK. By admitting violations of that agreement Pyongyang may be seeking a new accord with new mutual concessions. The fact that all of this is occurring when the United States is preoccupied by a prospective war in Iraq reinforces the logic of such a policy approach because of the potential for Pyongyang's brinkmanship to function as North Korea's version of a preemptive strategy that is designed to put the Bush administration in an awkward position.

Implications for U.S. Policy

If that is what North Korea is doing, it is a high risk enterprise in the context of the U.S. war on terrorism and likely war in Iraq because of the way it suggests U.S. inconsistency and a double-standard. The core rationales used to justify regime change in Baghdad have centered on the prospect that Iraqi WMD capabilities could expand rapidly from chemical and biological to nuclear if the United States does not take preemptive actions. Coupled with all the reasons for including Iraq in the "axis of evil", this made the case for putting Iraq at the forefront for U.S. military action during its war on terrorism. Could this now change because of Pyongyang's acknowledgement? The Kim Jong II regime's "evil" qualities of authoritarian oppression, involvement in global support for terrorist-linked activities, and possession of all WMD capabilities—as well as the missile delivery means that endanger two key U.S. allies (South Korea and Japan) and sizable U.S. forces deployed there—arguably make North Korea a more tangible threat to U.S. interests than Iraq is. After all, some contend certain classes of North Korea's *Taepo dong* missiles could reach the U.S. homeland—Hawaii, Alaska, and maybe beyond. By acknowledging a covert nuclear program in a manner that would likely generate greater attention to these comparative realities North Korea may have been motivated by a desire to embarrass U.S. hard liners as they make their case for a war in Iraq, thereby derailing the potential for North Korea to be next in line in the wake of a U.S. success in Iraq.

The leaders in Pyongyang may want U.S. policy making circles, across an ideological spectrum, to ask each other several delicate questions. Should the United States shift its war plans from Iraq to North Korea? Or should it add North Korea as a third front to supplement the war on terrorism and a war in Iraq? Or should the United States use North Korea's revelations about its nuclear posture to rethink its Korea policy and seek a sounder approach to engagement via diplomatic preemption?

Advocates of each approach will make their cases in what will be a new round of debate over U.S. policy precipitated by Pyongyang's nuclear acknowledgement. If the proactive military preemption school of thought prevails vis-a-vis the Korean portion of the "axis of evil," the United States will face a significant challenge. What would have been a formidable two front war (on terrorism plus an Iraq that has not militarily recovered from the Gulf War) will either become a more formidable two front war because of North Korea's greater military power or it will become a truly daunting three front war that will test the resolve of the U.S.-ROK-Japan alliance severely. Alternatively, if North Korea's nuclear revelations lead the United States toward a form of diplomacy calculated to bring about inter-Korean reconciliation, Washington can help achieve "regime change" there by facilitating the processes of Korean reunification in ways that will enhance regional stability through peaceful means. As much as that approach has merit and is warranted in the Northeast Asian context, it also could precipitate inadvertent problems by removing North Korea from the vaunted "axis of evil," thereby reinforcing the views of radical Islamists around the world that the U.S. war on terrorism amounts to a war between the West and Islam.

Although some of North Korea's motivations remain unclear and could pose palpable risks, on balance there are ample reasons for the United States to take advantage of the situation and utilize the circumstances to induce positive change on the Korean peninsula. If that approach proves successful there, the policy will have been well justified. Moreover, if the United States and North Korea can get past the current crisis and use it to foster an expanded dialogue that would benefit the entire Korean peninsula and its neighbors, that process could potentially be used as a paradigm elsewhere.

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