



Kim Jong Il's Nuclear Winter

By Nicholas Eberstadt

The United States and its allies have exacerbated the danger that North Korea poses to international security by failing to sanction Pyongyang meaningfully for violating all of its pledges concerning nuclear nonproliferation.

North Korea recently announced that it had “manufactured nukes,” that “these weapons” would be kept “for self-defense under any circumstances,” and that Pyongyang would immediately suspend its participation in further six-party denuclearization talks for an indefinite period. So much for probing North Korea’s nuclear intentions. That game is now over. With the illusions of the international community’s engagement theorists suddenly and nakedly exposed, the rest of us are obliged to face some unpleasant truths about the unfolding proliferation spectacle in the Korean peninsula.

To begin, it is plain today that none of the actors involved in the North Korean nuclear drama (apart, of course, from Pyongyang itself) had any real fallback plan for what to do if “conference diplomacy” failed. Even worse, it would seem that the governments of the United States and its allies in South Korea and Japan have no clear idea of where their own “red lines” lie in the approaching emergency.

Lines Drawn, Lines Crossed

A “red line,” we may recall, is national-security jargon for the perimeter demarcating a country’s core interests and priorities: it is meant to highlight boundaries whose violation would prompt retaliatory action, including potential use of

military force. One might think that the prospect of a nuclear North Korea is practically the textbook illustration of the reason for red lines. Yet ever since the start of this latest chapter in the North Korean nuclear saga, the United States, its Asian allies, and all the other members of the world community have repeatedly demonstrated to North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il that he need fear no appreciable penalties and would likely suffer no troublesome consequences in bearing down the path to an atomic arsenal of his very own.

Consider the diplomatic ledger for North Korea since October 2002. When Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly confronted counterparts with evidence that Pyongyang had a secret and illicit highly enriched uranium program, Pyongyang’s officials flaunted the violation back at him. Was this unequivocal breach of North Korea’s nonproliferation obligations and pledges a red line? Apparently not: the United States did not even acknowledge the incident until journalists were set to break the story. Two and a half months after the incident (and in the face of considerable South Korean reluctance), the United States finally arranged for a cutoff of free oil shipments to North Korea—a shutdown that deprived Pyongyang of roughly one-tenth of its annual foreign-aid revenues.

In December 2002, purportedly in response to the free-oil cutoff, North Korea announced it would be expelling the IAEA inspectors at its Yongbyon nuclear facility and disabling the “safeguards” for keeping watch over the facility’s

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plutonium. Was this a red line? Not for Washington: the Bush administration made some initial noises about taking the issue to the UN Security Council then quietly dropped the idea. In January 2003, Pyongyang served notice of its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in ninety days. The NPT represented its last remaining legal commitment to refrain from developing nuclear weapons. The following month, it declared it had reactivated its Yongbyon reactor. The international reaction? Washington and the EU both announced they were sending additional—but more limited—shipments of food aid to North Korea.

In April 2003, about two weeks after North Korea's NPT pullout was formalized, Kelly again met with North Korean officials, this time in Beijing. They privately warned him that Pyongyang already possessed nuclear weapons and threatened test blasts, or international exports, unless the United States provided a major package of benefits and concessions. How did the United States retaliate to the nuclear blackmail? By pressing for more conferencing: a "six-party talks" scheme, at which South Korea, Japan, and Russia could join Washington, Pyongyang, and Beijing for further "talk" about the North Korean nuclear problem. Everything one needs to know about the tenor of these subsequent "talks," incidentally, is contained in the press stories detailing payments by both Beijing and Moscow simply to get Pyongyang to agree to show up.

In spring 2003 Chung-in Moon, a well-known security theorist and senior adviser to the current South Korean government, reported he had met with North Korean officials and had spelled out for them the red lines they must not cross: those included "reprocessing nuclear fuel" and "selling plutonium abroad." Sure enough, within the month, the North Korean press announced that Pyongyang had begun reprocessing the plutonium from the 8,000 spent fuel rods at Yongbyon and then began to hint that it was developing a "war deterrent." Seoul's official response to this indisputable challenge to its supposed red line was a series of timid mutterings. Several months later, however, South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun finally reacted in concrete terms: with a promise of massive new aid if only Pyongyang would give up its weapons program!

Until last year, many Western observers and policy-makers seemed to feel that the international trafficking of nuclear materials was one singularly inviolable red line North Korea would have to observe. But now it looks like that has also been crossed. As news stories over the past

month have disclosed, the U.S. government is now "near certain" that North Korea provided Libya with processed uranium after 9/11—and perhaps as recently as 2003.

North Korea has borne exactly no costs for what is ostensibly an extraordinarily destabilizing nuclear transgression. Quite the contrary: as the alarming intelligence about the Libyan–North Korean connection percolated through Seoul, the South Korean government responded with a new outpouring of concessions and blandishments for the North Korean regime. In recent weeks, in fact, Seoul has formally declared that North Korea is no longer the "main enemy" in South Korean defense policy and has acted to discourage North Korean refugees from trying to go south.

No less significant is Seoul's newly revised position on nuclear aid for Pyongyang. Raising the ante and lowering the bar, Seoul now promises to give "large scale economic support" as soon as the North even "starts to give up its nuclear program." Interestingly enough, less than two weeks after the South unveiled this generous new plan, the North officially declared its status as a nuclear power.

Making Matters Worse

We in the outside world can only speculate about the timing of North Korea's self-proclaimed entry into the nuclear-weapons club. As we reflect on the sorry record of events that has led us to this juncture, however, a most worrisome possibility is that the North Korean state has actually been learning from its interactions with the United States and the rest of the world.

To date, an ever more menacing North Korean nuclear program has in practice encountered only token resistance from the United States and others, despite the obvious and increasing threats that program poses to national interests in many countries. Each new round of North Korean nuclear provocations has generated clear-cut benefits for the North Korean state, rather than incontrovertible costs. It will be very unpleasant—and very expensive—to un-teach Pyongyang the lessons of the past two and a half years.

"We don't have any red lines" for dealing with North Korea, Colin Powell confided on camera in October 2004. So far as can be told, he was telling the absolute truth. The message was intended to be reassuring. In fact, it is chilling. Far from deferring or mitigating the peril of conflict with North Korea, such Western fecklessness only magnifies the eventual scale of the expected disaster.