

**Backwards and Forwards: North Korean Nuclear Weapons and the Bush administration**

Backwards and forwards while getting nowhere. Is there a better way to describe the never ending story of “North Korean nuclear crisis” during the two terms of Bush administration? That the U.S., even at its most powerful during the post-Cold War “unipolar moment,” was not able to resolve the issue of development of nuclear weapons by North Korea (NK / DPRK), an impoverished Stalinist sanctuary, although it has been trying to do so for 15 years now, presents one of the fascinating puzzles of international politics. It has led to an enormous amount of publications either criticizing the policies used, proposing alternative ones, or both. Given that one of the basic rules of studying politics, be it national or international, is not to take leaders’ stated goals at face value, but to try to uncover their incentives and other plausible reasons for their actions, it is surprising that analysts and commentators of all sorts still take the stated U.S. goal of denuclearization of DPRK for granted. I will argue in this essay, using the strategic choice approach, that the reason the situation remains unresolved is because it is actually an outcome that was preferred by the U.S under George W. Bush.<sup>1</sup>

I will start my analysis with the military capabilities and information that the two adversaries have. U.S. has immense military (and power projection) capabilities including almost 10 000 nuclear warheads, 11 carrier groups, and over 700 military bases worldwide that allow it to dominate the planet. DPRK has mediocre military capabilities, and no way of projecting power

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<sup>1</sup> Although this article focuses predominantly on the U.S. side of the negotiations, it should not be understood as defending DPRK or its policies. The views expressed are mine. I would like to thank Gavan McCormack, Barbara Walter, KDI school, IR/PS and the reviewer.

outside its territory, apart from its artillery shelling south of the DMZ, area that includes Seoul (home to almost 50% of South Korean population) and numerous U.S. military bases.

The U.S. can win a war with NK, and its leader is certain about this outcome. Due to this info, he is also certain NK will not attack it. NK's leader knows he will certainly lose war with the U.S., and therefore, will not attack it or its allies, but is uncertain whether it will be attacked and vanquished by the U.S. Note that the outcome of war doesn't mean it is costless, indeed later we will see just how costly the U.S. thought it would be. Due to the imbalance in capabilities, U.S. credibly committing itself to not attack DPRK at some time in the future is unsurprisingly one of the NK's main demands.

NK leadership is one player in the crisis, and it is maximizing staying in power. It was faced with unprecedented crisis in the early 1990s as the Soviet bloc disintegrated and former trade partners turned to the West and South Korea (SK) and ceased providing aid and subsidized energy. NK economy went into freefall while its superpower sponsor and protector disappeared, leaving NK with little resources but facing the modern U.S. and SK armies on its border. Moreover, there was the U.S. nuclear weapons advantage, and U.S. has consistently threatened in to use nuclear weapons in Northeast Asia since the 1940s (Cumings 2003: 15, McCormack 2007b). NK's strategic choice was one between position of weakness that would only get worse, or developing nuclear weapons that would provide deterrent against the U.S. that is more effective and cheaper than conventional forces, and advances NK's bargaining position in future as well. It chose the second option.

On the U.S. side, the player is the executive. In 1993, when the U.S. found out that NK is working on acquiring nuclear weapons, Clinton faced the choice between war and negotiations. War was considered to be extremely costly: the U.S. commander in Korea estimated U.S. casualties to reach 80 – 100 000 dead, with SK military deaths in hundreds of thousands

(Cumings 2003:72). Clinton therefore chose negotiations, and a deal was reached to freeze NK's (plutonium) nuclear program in exchange for fuel oil, civilian nuclear reactors, and security guarantees. Although U.S. promised to give DPRK 'formal assurances' that it would not threaten it with nuclear weapons, such assurances were never provided, and moreover, the United States was slow to implement its commitments leading to a great and increasing frustration in the NK (Carpenter 2004: 49-50; Cumings 2003: 81-2, 87). NK thus decided to defect from the agreement, and started to secretly pursue highly enriched uranium (HEU) nuclear weapons program.

The suspicion that NK has initiated HEU program was passed by the Clinton administration to the Bush transition team in 2000, and it was suggested that it should be no obstacle to keeping plutonium nuclear weapon program frozen, because HEU is a hard technology to master and would require many years of experimentation before yielding usable weapons (Cumings, 2007). Nevertheless, Bush did surprisingly effectively nothing about this until late 2002. In October 2002, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly accused NK from pursuing this secret HEU program, and this charge was used to abort the 1994 Agreed framework deal. During the same month, DPRK offered to freeze its nuclear program and cease proliferating nuclear and missile technology in exchange for security guarantee from the U.S., normalization of relations including recognition of DPRK, and economic aid, but to no avail (Cumings 2003: 93). Bush administration would have none of it.

Instead, NK regime was labeled by Bush administration as "evil," talks with it were refused, as were any security guarantees or any phased mode of settlement until NK's unilateral submission in the form of complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantling of its nuclear weapons and materials (McCormack, 2007b). This U.S. position led to first three rounds of Six Party Talks

(first in 2003, two in 2004) yielding effectively no results.<sup>2</sup> Only when the U.S. changed its stance and offered a pledge not to attack or invade the NK during the fourth round did the Six Party Talks led to an agreement on principles of the way toward denuclearization (Cumings, 2007). This deal was almost immediately, in fact just the following day, scuttled by the U.S. by way of launching financial sanction against NK's assets in a small Macao bank, purportedly due to counterfeiting and money laundering concerns, resulting in what the architect of the policy David Asher described as delivering a “catastrophic blow” or “a direct blow at the fundamentals of the North Korean system” (McCormack, 2007b).

Finally, a “landmark” deal that originated in highly secret direct talks between Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill and NK's Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan and only later was presented to the Six-Party Talks for ratification, was reached on 13 February 2007 (Cumings 2007). It got quickly mired in the usual disagreements. One of the issues that the deal addressed was the return of NK funds frozen in Macao. The U.S. was supposed to allow the return within 30 days (March 13), following which the North Koreans would shut down their reactor at Yongbyon by April 15. But the U.S. missed the agreed deadline by almost a month and money was finally released only on April 11, just three days before the deadline for shutting down the reactor (Gusterson, 2007). Then followed a lengthy tug-of-war about the formal declaration of formal declaration listing all of NK's plutonium-related facilities and stating how much weapons-grade plutonium it has reprocessed. But the main sticking point proved to be the disablement of plutonium program, where the U.S. during 2008 “insisted that the disablement be verified--

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<sup>2</sup> The allegations about HEU program were also used to prevent meaningful negotiations. During the third round, on 24 June 2004, the Bush administration proposed a new, detailed denuclearization agreement but insisted that North Korea first admits the existence of the alleged uranium-enrichment facilities and specifies where they are located as a precondition to the discussions, which Pyongyang predictably refused (Harrison, 2005).

moving the goalposts beyond what the six parties had agreed to do [in February 2007]” (Sigal, 2009).

Both the HEU program and the counterfeiting charges are today regarded as other examples of Bush administration spinning the available intelligence to fit its political goals of the moment. Indeed, once they served their purpose, they were quietly reversed: the quality of information that U.S. intelligence community has on NK HEU program was downgraded in 2007 to “mid confidence level” (meaning that available information can be interpreted in various ways) and no further evidence of large scale procurement needed for such a program was found since, and as for the financial sanctions “it is now clear that the evidence was skimpy and that the sanctions were specifically designed to destroy the September pledges” (Cumings 2007, McCormack 2007b).<sup>3</sup> Even when the Bush administration seemed to finally change the course from isolation and regime change to what seemed to be bona fide negotiations preceding the February 2007 deal, the U.S. still managed to miss its deadlines and demand more than was agreed from NK afterwards, complicating the denuclearization process. If U.S. goal was denuclearization as stated, wouldn't it have incentives to cooperate more fully once a reasonably deal was reached in 2007? Or even offer NK a better deal to reach it faster, before NK accumulates larger stockpile of nuclear weapons? A look at Bush's domestic constituencies, neoconservatives and ballistic missile defense (BMD) lobby, suggests that there were other preferences that Bush was maximizing then defusing the nuclear crisis.

First are the neocons, who have aimed for containment of China, and to achieve this would like to keep troops in Japan and South Korea and militarize Japan. Neocons have argued for containing China since 1997, and have pursued this policy since Bush got to power (Chollet

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<sup>3</sup> The alleged ability of NK to produce high quality fakes of the U.S. 100\$ bills was doubted by many, including Swiss federal criminal police. See Hall (2008).

and Goldgeier 2008: 175, Klare 2006).<sup>4</sup> The problem they faced was how to legitimize the massive presence of U.S. soldiers in Japan and SK (over 93 000 in 1990, down to 66 000 in 2005) in the face of disappearing threats, given that explicitly stating the mission as containing China was a non option, to the citizens of the two nations and their politicians. U.S. was facing intensifying anti-Americanism and calls for withdrawal of the troops in democratizing Korea (especially since Kim Daejung initiated sunshine policy) and increasingly vocal protests of Okinawans in Japan. Neocons also want a militarized Japan closely allied to U.S., and the propensity of Japanese for pacifism was hindering this.<sup>5</sup> Second is the BMD lobby, personified by Frank Gaffney, and consisting of assorted Republicans and defense contractors eager to develop missile defense to ensure American hegemony for all, endless profits for some, and a stepping stone for space based weapons.<sup>6</sup> Here, Japan prodded by the NK nuclear threat is also chipping in: Japan decided to cooperate with the U.S. on developing BMD (including financing of 1/3 of the costs of the development phase of BMD, \$8-10bn.), lifting of arms export ban to the U.S. for BMD components in December 2004, and hosting the U.S. radar sites for detection of ballistic missiles launches (Samuels 2007: 105-6, 172, 174).

For these three goals (U.S. presence in Northeast Asia, militarization of Japan, and continuing development of BMD) the boogeyman of nuclear armed NK is crucial. Scaring population into supporting containment of U.S. geopolitical competitors and the defense spending this requires is a tried and trusted formula in the U.S. (e.g. bomber gap and missile gap during the

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<sup>4</sup> Although it is president who is responsible for foreign policy, Bush is widely recognized to have been under influence of his vice-president and advisors to an unusually high degree.

<sup>5</sup> For American role in militarizing Japan, and Japan's growing involvement in US global imperialism, see Gavan McCormack's *Client state: Japan in the American Embrace*. For analysis of impact of North Korea on contemporary Japanese security discourse see Samuels (2007).

<sup>6</sup> For Gaffney's ties with the defense industry see New York times article *After High-Pressure Years, Contractors Tone Down Missile Defense Lobbying*, for defense contractors lobbying in Congress see *Tangled Web 2005: A Profile of the Missile Defense and Space Weapons Lobbies*, and for the argument that BMD is paving way for weaponization of space see Chalmers Johnson's *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*.

Cold War, second Iraq war more recently), only this time it is aimed partially at non-US citizens as well.<sup>7</sup> DPRK that is pursuing nuclear weapons or is nuclear armed, plus portrayed as irrational and aggressive, is the best advertisement for (and assurance of) continuing U.S. troop presence in East Asia. U.S. reaching a deal with NK, and carrying out its obligations, could result in a (at least partly) denuclearized, less threatening NK. This would deprive the U.S. of the legitimization of its troops in East Asia, endanger ongoing militarization of Japan, and remove half of the declared rationale for developing the BMD. It was in the interest of the Bush constituencies to avoid, delay or scuttle any deal with NK, while keeping the regime intact and seemingly threatening. And that is indeed what we have seen throughout the Bush period. The abrupt reversals and seemingly incoherent policies were in fact consistent. Harrison (2005) argues that the sudden, trumped up accusation of NK secretly pursuing the HEU program in 2002 by Bush administration was caused by a U.S. fear of rapprochement in Northeast Asia:

*Kelly's confrontation with Kang seems to have been inspired by the growing alarm felt in Washington in the preceding five months over the ever more conciliatory approach that Seoul and Tokyo had been taking toward Pyongyang; by raising the uranium issue, the Bush administration hoped to scare Japan and South Korea into reversing their policies... on September 17, 2002, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited Pyongyang to discuss the normalization of relations--a visit that Japan had been quietly exploring for more than nine months without telling the United States. Washington, in fact, found out about the trip only three weeks before it occurred, when Koizumi presented the upcoming visit as a fait accompli to Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. Koizumi ... refused to call off the trip even after Armitage revealed Washington's suspicions about a secret North Korean uranium program. [The Bush administration] faced with the prospect that the North Korea policies of South Korea and Japan had slipped out of its control, and plans for Kelly's visit to Pyongyang were accelerated, and his showdown with North Korean leaders came less than three weeks after Koizumi's meeting with Kim Jong Il.*

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<sup>7</sup> According to Samuels, DPRK saber rattling tilted public opinion toward LDP's plans to modernize Japanese military, while senior Japanese leaders have invoked the DPRK threat at every turn, stimulating a pervasive sense of threat, and often as a surrogate for China (p. 149).

Later, as we saw above, the 2005 deal was effectively nullified by the simultaneous launch of financial sanctions, while the 2007 one was marked first by U.S. foot-dragging and intransigence on the issues of lifting financial sanctions and declaration, and then by insisting on demanding more concessions from NK without a quid-pro-quo. At the same time, Bush administration made sure that it supplied the publicly demonized “Axis of Evil” regime with enough supplies to ensure its survival. During the 1996 – 2004 period, U.S. supplied over \$1.1 billion worth of aid to NK (\$433 million, or 39% of that, under Bush), and gave more food aid to NK than China (CRS 2005: 2, 17), thus helping to keep the Pyongyang regime afloat and playing its boogeyman role.

What we have witnessed since 2000 was not a failed policy, but a largely successful one that led to no calls for withdrawal of U.S. forces from Northeast Asia, major changes in Japan’s security doctrine toward militarization, and rapid progress in fielding the BMD system that satisfied Bush’s key constituencies. We have also witnessed an arrogant attempt to manage the public opinion, both in America and worldwide, in order to further the goals of interest groups closest to the Bush administration. Although Bush’s policy in Northeast Asia didn’t yet backfire in such a spectacular manner as it did in Iraq and Afghanistan, it led to DPRK acquiring more nuclear weapons, a nuclear test, and possibly better missiles that would have been the case had the 1994 Agreed Framework stayed intact. These, coupled with a fraying health of Kim Jong Il and the reported ascendancy of hardliners from the military could create a dangerous mix in the near future. Hopefully, Barack Obama who has a very different set of constituencies from Bush will work toward a genuine resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue.

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