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## North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Development Implications for Future Policy

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*In collaboration with the Atomic Energy Commission (CEA)*

**Jonathan D. Pollack**

*Spring 2010*



**Security Studies Center**

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Though it has long been a concern for security experts, proliferation has truly become an important political issue with the last decade, marked simultaneously by the nuclearization of South Asia, the weakening of international regimes and the discovery of frauds and traffics, the number and gravity of which have surprised observers and analysts alike (Iraq in 1991, Libya until 2004, North Korean and Iranian programs or the A. Q. Khan networks today).

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The opinions in this paper the author's own and should not be attributed to the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or the Naval War College.

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# Introduction

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This essay assesses North Korea's long-standing quest for nuclear weapons; alternative strategies for inhibiting Pyongyang's weapons development; and the potential implications for regional security and non-proliferation should the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) retain and enhance its weapons programs. North Korea's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability has long provoked heated debate among policy makers and research analysts about the purposes of engagement with the North, reflecting the repeated frustrations in efforts to negotiate Korean denuclearization.<sup>1</sup> These debates reflect widely divergent views of the North Korean regime; its sustainability as an autonomous political, economic, and military system; and the potential consequences of continued nuclear development in this isolated, highly idiosyncratic state. These questions assume additional salience as North Korea approaches a leadership succession for only the second time in its six-decade history.

The effort to inhibit North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons is among the longest running and least successful sagas in international security and non-proliferation policy of the past quarter century. In early 2010, Pyongyang claims a rudimentary nuclear capability by possession of weaponized plutonium, the conduct of two nuclear tests, and advances in the production of enriched uranium as an alternative means of fissile material production, though the latter step is nominally justified as a source for reactor fuel. North Korea defends its pursuit of a nuclear deterrent to counter what Pyongyang deems existential threats posed by the United States.<sup>2</sup> Despite the resumption of high-level diplomatic contact between Washington and Pyongyang in late 2009, realization of a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula remains a very remote prospect. The DPRK insists that a peace agreement between the U.S. and North Korea and hence the cessation of "hostile DPRK-U.S. relations" are necessary before any

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<sup>1</sup> The debates over alternative policy approaches are remarkably unchanged over time. See Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998; and Victor D. Cha and David C. Kang, *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003. On the 2000s, see Joel Wit et al., *U.S. Strategy Towards North Korea: Rebuilding Dialogue and Engagement*, Washington, Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, U.S.-Korea Institute, October 2009; and Narushige Michishita, "Playing the Same Game: North Korea's Coercive Attempt at U.S. Reconciliation", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4, October 2009, pp. 139-152.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent authoritative statement of North Korean policy, see Statement of the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 11 January 2010.

consideration of denuclearization.<sup>3</sup> But Pyongyang further asserts that it will retain its nuclear weapons “until the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the world is realized.”<sup>4</sup> The North’s problematic involvement in nuclear commerce and technology transfer adds significantly to this highly perturbing picture. The operative policy issues for the United States therefore focus less on an early end to the program, and more on how to mitigate the potential security risks resulting from North Korean behavior and strategic intentions.

U.S. views of North Korean nuclear weapon development and the negotiability of this issue have shifted significantly over the years. Three recent developments in particular have diminished political support for accommodation and engagement: (1) the North’s participation in the construction of a nuclear reactor in Syria destroyed in an Israeli attack in September 2007<sup>5</sup>; (2) North Korea’s second nuclear test of May 2009 and its avowed claims to status as a nuclear weapons state; and (3) the far more cautionary attitudes of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, compared to the policies of his two immediate predecessors, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, both of whom were deeply committed to engagement with the North.

Despite some partial successes in restraining the DPRK’s nuclear development (notably, the partial disablement of its graphite moderated reactor and related facilities in 2008), these accomplishments have proven reversible, ephemeral, or both. This pattern is both dismaying and worrisome. For two and half decades, North Korea has stymied, delayed, circumvented, and otherwise foiled the efforts of allies, adversaries, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure the DPRK’s compliance with its non-proliferation obligations, all the while retaining the engineering and industrial capabilities necessary for nuclear weapons development. North Korea has also engaged in unambiguous violations of its declared commitments to denuclearization. In January 2003, the DPRK withdrew from the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), making it the only state ever to do so, and in February 2005 it declared that it possessed nuclear weapons. It attempted long-range missile launches in July 2006 and April 2009, conducted nuclear tests in October 2006 and May 2009, and since late 2008 has claimed status as a nuclear weapons state outside the NPT.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* This stance was reinforced in an interview with visiting Italian legislators several weeks later by Kim Yong Nam, North Korea’s nominal Chief of State. Kim asserted that any return to the Six Party Talks required fulfillment of three conditions: (1) the beginning of negotiations on a peace treaty with the United States and China; (2) initiation of bilateral talks with the United States on security guarantees to the DPRK; and (3) the lifting of economic sanctions against North Korea. See Masaru Sato’s article in *Nihon Keizai Shimbun (Nikkei Telecom 21 Database Version)*, 23 January 2010.

<sup>4</sup> “Memorandum of the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs-The Korean Peninsula and Nuclear Weapons”, *Korea Central News Agency*, 21 April 2010.

<sup>5</sup> David E. Sanger, “Israel Struck Syrian Nuclear Project, Analysts Say”, *The New York Times*, 14 October 2007; David Albright and Paul Brannan, *The Al Kibar Reactor: Extraordinary Camouflage, Troubling Implications*, Washington, Institute for Science and International Security, 12 May 2008, available at: [www.isis.org](http://www.isis.org).

The shortcomings and (at times) outright failures in nuclear diplomacy with the DPRK have a long lineage. Under the Agreed Framework of October 1994, the Clinton Administration bought time by freezing North Korea's plutonium production capabilities, but a comprehensive resolution of controversies that triggered the first nuclear crisis was deferred indefinitely. The Bush Administration was openly contemptuous of the arrangements negotiated under its predecessor and walked away from the Agreed Framework, but it lacked a credible fallback plan when Pyongyang resumed its plutonium-based activities. Some senior Bush Administration officials, moreover, were convinced that North Korea would wilt under pressure or even collapse outright, but the DPRK defied such expectations, and moved quickly toward an avowed weapons capability.

The DPRK's long pursuit of strategic autonomy, however, remains at the center of this story, and starkly contradicts the North's claims that it is intent on a non-nuclear future. North Korea signed various agreements that, at least in theory, invalidated pursuit of nuclear weapons. These agreements included Pyongyang's assent to basic non-proliferation documents (the NPT in 1985 and ratification of an IAEA safeguards agreement in 1992); an inter-Korean accord (the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula) that entered into force in 1992; bilateral agreements with the United States (the Agreed Framework in 1994 and additional denuclearization provisions under the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization accords of 1995); and multilateral declarations negotiated at the Six-Party Talks in Beijing in 2005 and 2007. But negotiated agreements failed to eliminate the North Korea's pursuit of the technologies and expertise necessary for a weapons program. By walking away from these agreements (especially the negotiated accords of 2005 and 2007), Pyongyang compelled Washington and other capitals to undertake reassessments of previous policies.



# Comparing Policy Approaches

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Korean denuclearization boils down to two essential but highly divergent approaches: those emphasizing political and economic inducements, and those focused on constraints and prevention. Incentive-based approaches emphasize the demand side of the nuclear equation. They presume that inducement and assurance, if pursued with sufficient diligence and consistency, will diminish and ultimately invalidate the value that the North attaches to nuclear weapons. At different times, this strategy has encompassed engagement, provision of energy and economic aid, and bilateral and multilateral pledges of peaceful intent; efforts to realize diplomatic relations; technical assistance in securing nuclear materials and disabling nuclear facilities; and (for a time) a major commitment to build light water reactors for power generation. By contrast, prevention-oriented approaches emphasize the supply side of the equation. These policies have sought to deny the North the means to pursue a nuclear program, and to mitigate the potential threats posed by capabilities that already exist. At various times, this has encompassed deterrence and defense; sanctions and interdiction of illicit technology acquisitions and weapons shipments; and pressure and attempted isolation.

A plethora of competing and often contradictory approaches has unambiguously failed to achieve posited goals at either end of the policy spectrum. Advocates of assurance contend that the U.S. has never demonstrated sufficient clarity or commitment to a more cooperative approach, enabling the repeated intrusion of more coercive strategies. Advocates of prevention argue that success was stymied by diplomatic concessions and compromises, enabling North Korea to maintain its weapons potential or pursue alternative paths to weapons development. As a consequence, the DPRK retained and ultimately augmented its technology, manpower, and material base for nuclear development, culminating with the tests of 2006 and 2009. In addition, North Korea pursued collaboration with other states seeking to develop nuclear weapons potential and advanced missile capabilities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Siegfried S. Hecker, "The Risks of North Korea's Nuclear Restart", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Web Edition, 12 May 2009, available at: <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition>. In an account prepared by Dr. A.Q. Khan at the time of his official interrogation for marketing enrichment technology and materials to North Korea, Libya, and Iran, Khan alleges that North Korea built a pilot enrichment plant in the 1990s. He also claims to have been shown six hemispheres comprising three reactor cores for plutonium bombs in 1999, seven years before the DPRK first detonated a nuclear device. It is impossible to verify Khan's claims, and some

This protracted, fitful, and unsuccessful history of denuclearization has induced ample wariness and outright cynicism about the resumption of past engagement strategies. Despite Pyongyang's routine characterizations of hostile American intent, it is increasingly arguable whether U.S. power and policy is as decisive a factor as the DPRK claims. The Obama Administration includes senior officials with ample prior experience in nuclear negotiations with North Korea, leading the administration to approach renewed negotiations with substantial skepticism. Two basic questions nonetheless persist. First, are there imaginable conditions under which the DPRK leadership is prepared to negotiate a non-nuclear future and dismantle its nuclear capabilities, especially since it is now a *de facto* nuclear state? How would the DPRK need to demonstrate this commitment in word and deed, and what might this require of external powers? Second, what are the policy alternatives if there is no realistic possibility of dissuading the DPRK from further pursuit of weapons development?

These questions are not new, but the policy context is very different from when these issues were addressed by the Clinton Administration in the early 1990s. The first issue concerns Pyongyang's strategic objectives, including what the regime deems negotiable, with whom, and with what goals in mind. The second issue concerns the price that the U.S. and other states are prepared to pay to sustain engagement with the North; and the political and strategic consequences of a failure to prevent continued nuclear weapons and missile development. These issues require consideration of North Korea's strategic decisions and nuclear advances since the breakdown of the Agreed Framework in 2002. They also require a fuller understanding of DPRK history, the factors shaping its pursuit of nuclear weapons, and the system's future prospects.<sup>7</sup>

In December 2009, after a fourteen month hiatus, the Obama Administration resumed high-level diplomatic interactions with the DPRK. Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, the U.S. Special Envoy for North Korea, visited Pyongyang and met with Senior Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Sok Ju (Kim Jong Il's closest foreign policy adviser and the primary architect of DPRK nuclear diplomacy) and Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kim Kye Gwan, the North's lead official in multilateral nuclear negotiations and in U.S.-North Korea relations since the early 2000s. Ambassador Bosworth characterized these talks as "exploratory discussions" to test North Korea's willingness to resume multilateral talks and reaffirm prior commitments to denuclearization.<sup>8</sup> Few observers, however, anticipate a

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prominent scientists (notably, Siegfried Hecker) have expressed open skepticism about many of these claims. R. Jeffrey Smith and Joby Warrick, "Pakistani Scientist Depicts More Advanced Nuclear Program in North Korea", *The Washington Post*, 28 December 2009.

<sup>7</sup> I have undertaken such an overview in Jonathan D. Pollack, *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons, and International Security*, London, Adelphi Books, forthcoming 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Ambassador Bosworth's visit marked the first high level official talks between the United States and North Korea in more than a year, though President Clinton did travel to the North on an unofficial mission in August 2009 to facilitate the release of two American journalists incarcerated by Pyongyang, when he met with Kim

major near-term breakthrough. The expectations of the principal disputants are highly divergent; the mistrust is too high; and the North's nuclear tests, accumulation of fissile material and completed weapons, claims to standing as a nuclear weapons state, and pursuit of uranium enrichment all pose major obstacles. The leadership succession process introduces another crucial factor in DPRK decision making, quite possibly further constraining the possibilities of policy change.

A potential negotiating window has again opened with North Korea, but to what end? The Obama Administration has characterized its fundamental policy objective as "a definite and comprehensive resolution" of the nuclear issue. How does the United States envision inhibiting and reversing programs and activities that Pyongyang has pursued for decades, and how does the U.S. avoid a repeat of past negotiating history? What does the United States deem necessary to protect against another failed effort to realize larger goals? To assess these issues, we need to begin with North Korea's strategic choices, and where nuclear capabilities appear to fit in the policy judgments of leaders in Pyongyang.

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Jong Il. Ambassador Bosworth discussed the results of his visit in an on the record briefing, Washington, 16 December 2009.



# Explaining North Korean Behavior

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The DPRK is Northeast Asia's conspicuous strategic outlier. It has upheld exclusivist, highly adversarial policies since the earliest years of the regime.<sup>9</sup> North Korea continues to set itself apart, hoping to ensure the system's autonomous existence and to insulate the population from what the leadership deems malign external influences. Over the past two decades, however, the North has experienced acute internal decline. Though its military capabilities continue to pose a direct threat to the Republic of Korea (ROK) and to Japan, the DPRK's defining imperative at present is to sustain the regime's existence. This will require a modicum of economic resuscitation, retention of the loyalty of key elites to the Kim family, and prevention of serious challenges from below. The leadership believes that unwavering central control is far more likely to preserve its absolute power than opening the DPRK to the outside world, in particular to fuller relations with the ROK, which possesses disproportionate economic weight relative to its beleaguered rival. The regime has also unequivocally reasserted a state-centered economic strategy, including mass mobilization campaigns and curtailment of modest experimentation with market-based activity. Mounting pressures (including an acutely misconceived attempt at currency redenomination in late 2009 that provoked public opposition and compelled the leadership to retreat from more extreme measures) suggest the dire circumstances faced by the ruling elite, who are without an effective strategy or means to reassert central control over the economy.<sup>10</sup>

Where do nuclear weapons fit in the regime's survival strategy? Put differently, what do nuclear weapons "buy" North Korea in advancing the system's goals? Pyongyang has sustained its nuclear development over the past two decades, but these aspirations stretch back much farther in North Korean history.<sup>11</sup> The pursuit of nuclear capabilities has persisted despite grievous economic hardship and societal privation that many observers believed would presage the state's demise. The North's nuclear policies have also stifled the possibilities of normal relations with the United States, the ROK, and Japan, though the importance of such relations to

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<sup>9</sup> See, in particular, Adrian Buzo, *The Guerilla Dynasty: Politics and Leadership in North Korea*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> *North Korea under Tightening Sanctions*, Seoul/Brussels, International Crisis Group, Asia Briefing No. 101, 15 March 2010, especially pp. 8-11.

<sup>11</sup> James Clay Moltz and Alexandre Y. Mansourov (eds.), *The North Korean Nuclear Program: Security, Strategy, and New Perspectives from Russia*, New York and London, Routledge, 2000; and Balazs Szalontai and Sergey Radchenko, *North Korea's Efforts to Acquire Nuclear Technology and Nuclear Weapons: Evidence from Russian and Hungarian Archives*, Washington, Cold War History Project, August 2006.

Pyongyang (especially with the latter two states) has diminished in recent years.

Toward the end of the Cold War, Moscow and Beijing wearied of the North's persistent record as *demandeur* and supplicant, conceding that Pyongyang's professions of loyalty were at best ephemeral. Both therefore opted to pursue full economic and political relations with the ROK and ceased open-ended subsidies to the North. In the aftermath of these decisions, the DPRK experienced large-scale deindustrialization, debilitating agricultural shortages (including a severe famine in the latter 1990s), and the virtual collapse of the public distribution system, which represented the essential social contract between the regime and the citizenry.<sup>12</sup> The North's grim internal circumstances reflected the cumulative results of systemic dysfunction evident in recent decades.<sup>13</sup> But the exceptionalist claims of the only two leaders in North Korean history (Kim Il Sung until his death in 1994, and Kim Jong Il in the subsequent fifteen years) have endured, coinciding with the enhanced pursuit of a nuclear capability.

As economic conditions plummeted, North Korea had no alternative but to rely on external sources of support. Significant portions of the population also turned to private economic activity. During the acute humanitarian crisis of the mid to late 1990s, the DPRK for the first time appealed for aid from non-governmental relief organizations and international institutions and from the United States. In the early 2000s the regime received large-scale financial assistance from the ROK Government. In recent years, as relations with South Korea and Japan deteriorated, Pyongyang again turned to economic, food, and energy assistance from China, with Beijing now the North's primary source of external aid.

North Korea's severe economic woes have prompted periodic calls for a nuclear "grand bargain", most recently advocated by ROK President Lee Myung-bak. Such initiatives presume that (in exchange for comprehensive economic assistance) the North would be prepared to weigh a leveraged buyout of its nuclear assets. Though alluring as a theoretical argument, Pyongyang has long resisted an "up front" trade of its nuclear capabilities for external aid, even more rejecting arguments that the ROK could serve as a principal interlocutor in nuclear diplomacy. Moreover, the regime does not seem compelled to make such a definitive decision. The DPRK's "system-defending" strategy continues to posit possession of nuclear weapons and retention of the means for additional weapons

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<sup>12</sup> See Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "The Political Economy of North Korea: Implications for Denuclearization and Proliferation", Honolulu, East-West Center Working Papers, Economics Series No. 104, June 2009. For a gripping portrayal of the North's economic and societal decline as experienced by former DPRK citizens, consult Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, New York, Spiegel and Grau, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> For an exhaustive account, see Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2006.

development.<sup>14</sup> At critical junctures, including in 2008, Pyongyang edged toward steps that would have inhibited any near-term reconstitution of its fissile material production capabilities. But the leadership balked at definitive actions, instead concluding that its nuclear production capabilities were too valuable as a strategic asset and as an insurance policy. As one especially pointed North Korean commentary recently observed, “the DPRK had access to the nuclear deterrent by spending a stupendous amount of money while tightening [its] belt and weathering all sorts of difficulties and ordeal ... This is aimed neither to threaten others nor to get any ‘economic benefit’ or reward ... It is only those stupid [individuals] that can think the DPRK may barter its nuclear deterrent for a petty amount of money in ‘economic aid’.”<sup>15</sup>

The Obama Administration is the fourth presidential administration to address the Korean nuclear issue, and it is keenly aware that the pursuit of denuclearization has frustrated previous administrations. The United States seeks North Korea's return to the long-suspended Six Party Talks and insists that Pyongyang unambiguously reaffirm its prior commitments to denuclearization. Without such steps, Washington refuses to consent to the DPRK's repeated calls for bilateral negotiations with the United States. To assess how the Obama Administration's longer-term policy calculations and expectations appear to differ from its predecessors, it is first necessary to examine the North's recent nuclear behavior, and the likely connections between Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons and the regime's internal goals.

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<sup>14</sup> For this concept and a fuller elaboration of its implications, see Adrian Buzo, *The Guerrilla Dynasty*, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> KCNA in English, Pyongyang, 19 February 2010.



# The DPRK's Renewed Nuclear Defiance

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Following the election of Barack Obama, most security and non-proliferation analysts anticipated renewed multilateral nuclear diplomacy and heightened bilateral diplomacy between the United States and North Korea, both of which had foundered in the waning months of the Bush Administration. But these expectations did not materialize. Despite President Obama's declared intention in his inaugural address to "extend a hand" to adversaries prepared to "unclench their fist", the DPRK undertook major shifts in policy that directly challenged the central premises of denuclearization.<sup>16</sup>

In a series of orchestrated, disproportionate actions justified as retaliation for measures taken by the U.N. Security Council, North Korea in the spring of 2009 walked away from every denuclearization measure painfully and incompletely negotiated during the latter years of the Bush Administration. Only hours after the issuance of a non-binding Security Council presidential statement on 13 April condemning Pyongyang's attempted satellite launch of the previous week, the DPRK described the statement as "an unbearable insult to our people and a criminal act never to be tolerated". Pyongyang insisted that it would "never" return to the Six Party Talks in Beijing, where all involved powers had pledged to pursue "the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner" and where North Korea had committed to "abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards". Pyongyang instead asserted that its prior commitments were null and void. The DPRK also declared it would "strengthen our self-defensive nuclear deterrent in every way", including weaponization of its entire inventory of plutonium, resumption of operations at its Yongbyon nuclear complex, and testing of intercontinental ballistic missiles.<sup>17</sup> It again expelled IAEA inspectors and U.S. government personnel from Yongbyon who had been assisting in the disablement of the graphite moderated 5 MW(e) reactor and associated facilities. The North also announced that it would accelerate

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<sup>16</sup> This section draws on Jonathan D. Pollack, "Kim Jong-il's Clenched Fist", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4, October 2009, pp. 153-173.

<sup>17</sup> Statement of the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 April 2009, available at: <http://www.kcna.co.jp>. For a technical review of the launch, consult David Wright and Theodore A. Postol, "A Post-launch examination of the Unha-2", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists Web Edition*, 29 June 2009, available at: <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/features/post-launch-examination-of-the-unha-2>.

pursuit of an enriched uranium capability, a program whose existence it had long denied.<sup>18</sup>

Why did the DPRK's sharply reverse its nuclear course, at the very onset of a new presidential administration that unambiguously signaled its interest in heightened engagement? Four explanations seem plausible: (1) aggrieved nationalism and alleged threats to the regime's sovereignty and security; (2) an assumption within the leadership that renewed defiance would increase attention from the Obama Administration; (3) leadership uncertainties following Kim Jong Il's stroke in the summer of 2008; and (4) the perceived need for a second nuclear test to overcome the technical failings of the initial detonation. Each warrants consideration.

### ***Assertive Nationalism: Conviction or Bargaining Behavior?***

Aggrieved nationalism was a pervasive theme in North Korean domestic media prior to and following the second nuclear test. Such adversarial characterizations have long been a staple of DPRK propaganda. The North's sequenced, almost choreographed statements and actions in early 2009 suggest an effort to mobilize domestic support for predetermined goals. Though the supposed offense to the DPRK's dignity and sovereignty often seems more pretext than explanation, these concerns are never far removed from the regime's strategic calculations. But these exceptionalist claims have increasingly skewed North Korea's policy expectations, in particular its view that nuclear capabilities would provide notional equality in dealings with the United States and other nuclear powers.

Important changes in North Korean policy, moreover, were already apparent in the months preceding the attempted satellite launch and the second nuclear test. In private discussions between senior DPRK diplomats and non-governmental interlocutors during the fall of 2008 and early winter of 2009, North Korean officials signaled significant changes in policy. (These shifts had been intimated at various points during the Six Party Talks, but they were not yet a dominant component in North Korean strategy.)<sup>19</sup> DPRK officials contended that any renewed nuclear negotiations had to acknowledge the North's possession of nuclear weapons, thus overtly challenging a basic premise of the agreements signed at the Six Party Talks.

According to North Korean officials, the DPRK's first nuclear test of 2006 and its accumulation of weaponized plutonium represented a fundamental strategic divide that reduced the importance of full relations

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<sup>18</sup> For a summary of the available information on North Korea's enrichment potential, consult Hui Zhang, "Assessing North Korea's Uranium Enrichment Capabilities", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Web Edition, 18 June 2009, available at: <http://www.thebulletin.org/node/7257>.

<sup>19</sup> I served on an expert group visiting the DPRK during 3-7 February 2009, at the invitation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Other meetings held between North Korean officials and non-official American interlocutors during late 2008 and early 2009 report comparable conclusions.

with the United States.<sup>20</sup> According to these officials, “the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” would require the United States to disengage from its security commitments in Northeast Asia, remove its nuclear umbrella from South Korea, withdraw U.S. military forces from the peninsula, and develop a U.S.-DPRK strategic relationship paralleling the U.S.-ROK alliance. North Korean officials also asserted that normalization (presumably entailing a peace agreement to supplant the armistice accords of July 1953) would have to precede denuclearization. In addition, North Korean officials argued that dismantlement and final verification of the DPRK’s nuclear holdings would not be possible unless the United States renewed its commitment to provide the light water reactors originally pledged under the now defunct Agreed Framework.<sup>21</sup>

These statements reinforced Pyongyang’s profoundly self-referential view of the external world. The DPRK posited the negation of U.S. Asia-Pacific security strategy and the marginalization of long-term U.S. allies. North Korean officials appear to believe that nuclear weapons provide the DPRK essential equivalence with the United States and other nuclear powers, while relegating the ROK and Japan to a lesser political and strategic status. Though broached principally in a Track II context, these arguments prefigured the North’s revised policy stance evident in the early months of the Obama Administration, and were inherently unacceptable to the United States.

### ***Misreading the New Administration***

North Korean actions also bear comparison to escalatory steps undertaken at previous junctures in U.S.-DPRK relations. Some senior officials in Pyongyang presumably recalled that missile negotiations with the Clinton Administration followed the North’s first attempted satellite launch in 1998, culminating in Kim Jong Il’s October 2000 pledge to Secretary of State Albright that North Korea would forego additional testing if the United States was prepared to launch satellites on the North’s behalf.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in the summer and early fall of 2006, Pyongyang undertook short and medium range missile tests and a failed attempt to launch a longer range missile, followed by its first nuclear detonation in early October. Within weeks of the nuclear test, the United States undertook negotiations with North Korea in Beijing, followed by more consequential bilateral talks in

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<sup>20</sup> North Korean policy statements issued the week before President Obama’s inauguration underscored the North’s strategic recalibration. See “DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman’s Press Statement on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula”, 13 January 2009, and “DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman Claims Normalization with U.S., Nuclear Issue ‘Separate’ Issues”, 17 January 2009, both available at: <http://www.kcna.co.jp>. These statements were an unmistakable signal to the incoming Obama Administration that the DPRK had unilaterally redefined its policy expectations of the United States.

<sup>21</sup> For a fuller elaboration of this issue deriving from the history of the Clinton Administration, consult Jeff Goldstein, “How Light Water Reactors Figure into Negotiations with North Korea”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 65, No. 4, July-August 2009, pp. 64-71.

<sup>22</sup> Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir*, New York, Miramax Books, 2003, pp. 581, 588-89.

Berlin in January 2007. These successive rounds of bilateral talks led to denuclearization accords at the Six Party Talks in February 2007 and October 2007.<sup>23</sup>

Pyongyang had sought to open a bilateral channel with Washington throughout President Bush's first term, but to no avail. The close correlation between the nuclear test and the increased negotiating latitude granted to the lead U.S. official then responsible for relations with North Korea (Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill) presumably convinced leaders in Pyongyang that the United States would only negotiate seriously with the DPRK when the U.S. confronted acute challenges to its core policy objectives. In the spring of 2009, North Korea sought to repeat the course of action that had worked at least twice before.

If leaders in Pyongyang hoped to replicate prior breakthroughs with Washington through renewed coercive diplomacy, they miscalculated badly. The Obama Administration cautioned Pyongyang about the implications of another attempted long-range missile launch and warned of more severe consequences that would follow another nuclear detonation. The administration made good on both warnings. Rather than heighten engagement with the DPRK, the United States moved quickly to impose costs on Pyongyang for its actions. U.S. officials also emphasized that any resumption of high-level diplomatic contact would require Pyongyang to reaffirm its prior denuclearization commitments and to cease additional escalatory steps. In addition, the United States emphasized that any future commitments by North Korea would need to be binding and irreversible.

### ***Confronting Internal Vulnerabilities***

North Korea's renewed strategic defiance correlated with Kim Jong Il's curtailed political role following his stroke suffered in mid-August 2008.<sup>24</sup> Kim Jong Il's acute medical problems and looming leadership uncertainties in the DPRK were very likely pivotal to North Korean decision making. Though the state did not appear headless during Kim's convalescence, Kim's health crisis appeared to contribute to shifts in policy. Core institutions within the North Korean system (especially the advanced weapons and internal security bureaucracies) had no incentive to display weakness under uncertain political circumstances. It is also possible that some bureaucratic constituencies seized on Kim's incapacitation to revisit earlier decisions (notably, the decision to disable the Yongbyon reactor complex) which they may have questioned or resisted.

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<sup>23</sup> For a detailed reconstruction, consult Mike Chinoy, *Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2008, Chapters 17-19.

<sup>24</sup> Kim was largely absent from public view during the late summer and early fall, most prominently at the meeting that marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the DPRK in September. Though he appeared in various photographs during late 2008, some of these photographs were doctored. His first post-stroke meeting with a foreign visitor was in mid-January 2009, with Wang Jiarui, Director of the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party.

In early January 2009, Kim – having long deferred a final decision on future leadership arrangements – designated his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, as his successor, with his son's accession to power to be overseen by a collective leadership composed of the elder Kim's inner circle.<sup>25</sup> Kim probably concluded that the attempted satellite launch and the second nuclear test would strengthen the hand of his successor, but the tests may also have been helped ensure full support for Kim Jong Un's succession from powerful domestic constituencies.

The missile test coincided with the 12<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Supreme People's Assembly (the DPRK's legislative body) in early April 2009, a quinquennial political event. Kim's reappointment as Chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC), increasingly the locus of decision making in the DPRK, was also announced at the meeting. In his first television footage since his stroke of the previous summer, Kim appeared tentative and physically weak. In addition, the legislative session highlighted the increased prominence of senior military officers in North Korean decision making, as well as the expanded membership of the NDC, including the appointment of Kim's brother in law Jang Song Thaek and Ju Kyu Chang, the reputed overseer of the DPRK's advanced weapons programs. (Ju had appeared in photographs with Kim during the latter's visit to the satellite launch center on the day of the rocket test.) The need to legitimate the succession to Kim and to further enshrine his policies overwhelmed any possible deferral or cancellation of the pending missile launch, which Beijing and Washington had both urged in communications with Pyongyang.

### ***Technical Imperatives: The Need for a Second Test***

The DPRK's policy retrogression culminated with its second nuclear detonation on 25 May 2009. According to U.S. intelligence estimates, the test had an explosive yield appreciably greater than the first nuclear test.<sup>26</sup> North Korean weapons scientists (having assessed the 2006 test results) probably saw the need for a second test to rectify apparent design and engineering deficiencies. Pyongyang's renewed diplomatic defiance

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<sup>25</sup> The first published reports of Kim Jong Un's designation as presumptive successor appeared in mid-January 2009, with Kim Jong Il purportedly issuing a directive to this effect on 8 January, Kim Jong Un's birthday. For the initial report, see Kim Hyun, "N. Korean Leader Names Third Son as Successor: Sources", *Yonhap News Agency*, 15 January 2009. Though Kim Jong Il's partial physical recovery since the summer of 2009 diminished the urgency of a formal succession announcement, there is no credible evidence to suggest that the leadership succession is under serious challenge.

<sup>26</sup> A U.S. intelligence assessment, released three weeks after the reported test, was brief, equivocal, and disclosed minimal information: "The U.S. Intelligence Community assesses that North Korea probably conducted an underground nuclear explosion in the vicinity of P'unggye on 25 May 2009. The explosion yield was approximately a few kilotons. Analysis of the event continues." *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, News Release No. 23-09, 15 June 2009. The ODNI had estimated the yield of the October 2006 nuclear test as "less than a kiloton", various non-governmental estimates range as low as 200 tons of TNT equivalent.

provided the opportunity.<sup>27</sup> The reactivation of the reprocessing facility at Yongbyon also enabled completion of the third reprocessing campaign since the collapse of the Agreed Framework, thereby permitting replenishment of the North's plutonium inventory.<sup>28</sup> The explosion may not have definitively validated the design of a deliverable weapon, but the test's evident success enabled North Korea to imply as much. Although reactor operations had not resumed at Yongbyon, North Korea had tethered its long-term security to additional nuclear development, not to any presumed benefits that denuclearization might provide.<sup>29</sup>

By invalidating all prior agreements, by pledging to expand and diversify its extant capabilities, and by again conducting a nuclear test, Pyongyang sought to return Korean denuclearization to square one. Unlike circumstances prevailing at the time of the Agreed Framework, however, the DPRK now possesses a nuclear inventory generally estimated at between four to eight nuclear explosive devices.<sup>30</sup> As an authoritative media commentary noted a month following the second test, "[W]e have never requested anyone to recognize our status as a nuclear weapons state nor have we entertained any idea of getting it recognized ... our strengthening of the nuclear deterrent is an irrefutable exercise of our independent right and sovereignty for the defense of our dignity, system, and safety of the nation ... our nuclear deterrent has nothing to do with someone's recognition of it and if it discourages the aggressors from provoking us randomly, its purposes are well served."<sup>31</sup> But such defiant statements obscured pressures that would soon impinge on the leadership, compelling tactical flexibility amidst continued efforts by Pyongyang to claim nuclear weapons status.

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<sup>27</sup> See Vitaly Fedchenko, "North Korea's Test Explosion, 2009", *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, December 2009, pp. 1-8. Fedchenko concludes: "Based on the seismic data, most estimates of the yield of the May 2009 explosion vary between 2 and 7 kilotons", or approximately "five times stronger than the 2006 test". Fedchenko, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Siegfried S. Hecker, "Lessons Learned from the North Korean Nuclear Crises," *Daedalus*, Vol. 139, No. 1, Winter 2010, pp. 44-56. Though DPRK is able in a technical sense to reprocess sufficient plutonium for one additional device each year, the lesser frequency of reprocessing campaigns since the reopening of the Yongbyon complex in late 2002 suggests both technical limitations as well as political calculations.

<sup>29</sup> For a particularly pointed commentary issued a week prior to the second nuclear test, see Paek Mun Kyu, "A Strong Countermeasure Will Follow Threat and Blackmail", *Rodong Sinmun*, 19 May 2009, available at: <http://www.kcna.co.jp>; "Reprocessing of Spent Fuel Rods Completed in DPRK", Pyongyang, *KCNA* in English, 3 November 2009, at: <http://www.kcna.co.jp>. KCNA claims that the reprocessing was completed between April and August.

<sup>30</sup> *North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programs*, Seoul and Brussels, International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 168, 18 June 2009. Secretary of State Clinton has recently asserted that "we know [North Korea] has somewhere between one and six nuclear weapons." Remarks on Nonproliferation at the University of Louisville, 9 April 2010, available at: [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov).

<sup>31</sup> Commentator, "Disgusting Kiss Between Master and Minion at White House Rose Garden, Commenting on Traitor Lee Myung-bak's Junket to the United States", *Rodong Sinmun*, 25 June 2009.

# Pyongyang Reassesses Its Policy Stance

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Pyongyang's asserted status as a nuclear state did not elicit the responses that North Korea anticipated. The United States focused on coordinated policy actions with other participants in the Six Party process, seeking to minimize any possibilities for Pyongyang to exploit potential differences among the five. On 12 June the Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1874, including sanctions intended to prevent or interdict nuclear, missile, and proliferation transactions.<sup>32</sup> The thrust of the Security Council's actions were fourfold: (1) heightened measures to curtail Pyongyang's efforts to acquire technology and materials needed for its weapons programs, including constraining the travel of key military R&D personnel and restrictions on financial transactions associated with weapons-related activities; (2) more rigorous monitoring, inspection, and prevention of weapons shipments leaving North Korea; (3) the cessation of all weapons exports by North Korea, thereby depriving the regime of needed revenue to sustain its strategic programs; and (4) denying the DPRK any political compensation for its claim to status as a state in possession of nuclear weapons outside the NPT. The Obama Administration also insisted that Pyongyang needed to explicitly reaffirm its previous commitments, halt its nuclear development, and undertake irreversible steps toward denuclearization.

U.S. opposition to North Korean moves and the economic and political costs imposed on the North elicited predictable objections from Pyongyang. By mid-summer the DPRK began to redefine its policy stance. A Foreign Ministry statement in late July conceded that the sanctions were "curbing the normal progress of the economy ... [and] aim[ed] to disarm and incapacitate the DPRK so that it can only subsist on the bread crumbs thrown away by [others]." The statement hinted that "there is a specific and reserved form of dialogue that can address the current situation", an oblique signal that Pyongyang understood the isolation and disfavor its actions had generated.<sup>33</sup> For the first time since walking away from denuclearization in late 2008, Pyongyang sought to escape from the hole that it had dug. The North's primary interest was to reestablish political and diplomatic contact with Washington. But it had yet to signal its willingness to return to the Six Party process or a readiness to forego its nuclear gains.

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<sup>32</sup> Security Council, SC/9679, 12 June 2009, available at: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2009/sc9679.doc.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> "DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman on Unreasonable Call for Resumption of Six Party Talks", 27 July 2009, available at: <http://www.kcna.jp>.

Pyongyang's stance shifted further during the brief early August 2009 visit by former President Clinton. This included a meeting with a somewhat reinvigorated Kim Jong Il, with Kim agreeing to release two U.S. journalists captured by North Korean security personnel during an unauthorized crossing of the China-DPRK border in March. North Korean media depicted the Clinton visit as a major victory, asserting that the United States had demonstrated a respectful attitude toward Kim that enabled "a consensus of views ... on resolving issues by way of dialogue."<sup>34</sup> Though the DPRK did not concede ground in its claimed nuclear status, Pyongyang was tacitly acknowledging some of the consequences of its more assertive strategy. The signals of renewed flexibility correlated with Kim's evident recovery from his stroke and the increased pace of his official activities, focused primarily on efforts to revive the DPRK economy.

### ***The Peninsular Dimension***

The sharp deterioration in inter-Korean relations also imposed mounting economic costs on the North. Following his inauguration as ROK president in early 2008, Lee Myung-bak had adopted a far more conditional approach toward North Korea, triggering intense hostility from the DPRK. During a November 2008 visit by senior military leaders to the Kaesong Industrial Zone (the showpiece of South Korea's engagement strategy with the North), there were unambiguous threats to close the zone.<sup>35</sup> In late January 2009, Pyongyang also declared all prior inter-Korean political-military agreements null and void, placing North-South relations in increased jeopardy.<sup>36</sup> However, as Seoul continued to restrict relations with the North in subsequent months, Pyongyang (at least tactically) pulled back from a confrontational stance. These gestures were likely prompted at least in part by the North's mounting economic woes and its hopes to renew sources of financial support from business partners in the ROK.

In mid-August, Kim Jong Il met with Hyun Chong-un, the chairwoman of Hyundai, the DPRK's primary corporate benefactor. (Hyundai's sunk costs in its troubled investments in the North provided ample justification for Hyun to meet with Kim, as well.) In a joint statement released following the meeting, Pyongyang signaled support for resumption of various income generating activities that it had terminated in late 2008. In addition, several of Kim's senior political lieutenants traveled to Seoul following the death of former president Kim Dae-jung in late August, where they met with President Lee. The exchanges with Lee and other South

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<sup>34</sup> *Korean Central Broadcasting Station* in Korean, 4 August 2009. President Clinton had come close to visiting the DPRK in the waning weeks of his presidency, so Kim Jong Il undoubtedly regarded Clinton's visit nearly nine years later as a matter of personal vindication.

<sup>35</sup> "N. Korea Steps Up Threats over Kaesong Complex", *Chosun Ilbo*, 10 November 2008, available at: <http://english.chosun.com>.

<sup>36</sup> The Committee on the Peaceful Reunification of Korea in late January declared: "All agreements adopted between the North and South in the past have already become dead letters and blank sheets of paper", thereby "nullify[ing] all agreed upon matters related to resolving the state of political and military confrontation between the North and the South." Pyongyang, *Korea Central Broadcasting Station*, 29 January 2009.

Korean officials seemed devoid of invective or overt hostility. But the overall tenor of North Korea's policies toward the South in subsequent months remained adversarial, with little evidence of sustained interest in more amicable inter-Korean relations. Pyongyang's expectations of a renewed income stream from the ROK have since dissipated, reinforcing its growing dependence on economic ties with China.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Hesitations and Inducements from Beijing***

China continues to confront major policy dilemmas in relations with the North. Beijing remains Pyongyang's primary point of diplomatic contact and leading provider of economic assistance, but this has not elicited the results that China anticipated. The Chinese have served as host and organizer of the Six Party Talks from the time of their inception in 2003, and President Hu Jintao had a major personal and political stake in the multilateral diplomatic process. Beijing's political investment in the Six Party Talks arguably exceeded that of all other states, as it had repeatedly maneuvered between Washington and Pyongyang and sought to avoid an outright breakdown in the negotiations. But the North's open denigration of the Six Party Talks and its resumed weapons development directly challenged major Chinese political and security equities.

How much influence did Beijing wield over Pyongyang's decisions and actions, and were the Chinese prepared to risk a major rupture in their relations with the North, notwithstanding the DPRK's lack of alternative sources of support? Despite the obvious asymmetries in the China-North Korea relationship, Beijing did not seem convinced that it had meaningful leverage over North Korea. Some analysts have long believed that China has the ability to compel North Korea, but that other Chinese interests (in particular, Beijing's unease about potential internal turbulence in the North) have repeatedly trumped Beijing's objections to North Korea's nuclear activities. Chinese policy makers generally saw their influence as circumscribed rather than decisive, viewing overt coercion as an overly blunt and potentially unpredictable instrument of policy.

These inhibitions were evident as Pyongyang escalated tensions in early 2009. Beijing had beseeched Pyongyang to refrain from the missile test, but to no effect. When China sought to soften the terms of the pending Security Council resolution, Pyongyang still reacted with intense hostility. China likely decided that heightening pressure against the North would only deepen the nuclear impasse. But Beijing also recognized the need to impose costs on Pyongyang for its actions. In the aftermath of the nuclear test, Beijing restricted some of its relations with the DPRK and pledged rigorous enforcement of the Security Council sanctions. It also cancelled or postponed several scheduled visits to the North. Unprecedentedly sharp criticisms of North Korea were published in authoritative Chinese journals

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<sup>37</sup> On 8 April 2010, North Korea announced that it would take possession of South Korean assets at the Mount Kumgang tourist site; it also threatened to "reexamine the work in the Kaesong Industrial Zone in an all-round way", thus again raising the prospect of an even more definitive estrangement in inter-Korean relations. Pyongyang, *Korea Central News Agency*, 8 April 2010.

during the late spring and early summer, attesting to China's clear dissatisfaction with Pyongyang.<sup>38</sup> Some of these criticisms touched on highly sensitive North Korean internal issues, including information about the Kim family never before disclosed in Chinese publications.

Despite its mounting frustrations with Pyongyang, Beijing still believed that more coercive measures (including efforts to isolate North Korea) posed unnecessary risks to Chinese interests. Beijing was prepared to impose costs on North Korea, but (as the only external power able to communicate regularly with senior officials in the North) it did not want to sever contact. Harsh critiques of North Korea continued to appear in Chinese media in subsequent months, including some oblique criticisms of PRC policy toward the DPRK. China sought to signal that its engagement with the North was neither unconditional nor open-ended. These articles revealed latent if seldom exposed policy fissures in Beijing. Even as the essential policies of China's top leadership seem apparent, there has been no outright closure in this debate.<sup>39</sup>

Senior Chinese officials undoubtedly recognized the potential liabilities in Beijing's continued support of Pyongyang, whose adversarial politics and international isolation echoed those of China from five decades ago. To most leaders in Beijing, the North was not a strategic asset but an inheritance and liability from which it could not readily separate. Some analysts assert that China continues to attach appreciable security value to its relationship with North Korea, but this seems doubtful.<sup>40</sup> Beijing does not welcome either instability or outright crisis on the peninsula, but it remains acutely aware of Pyongyang's continued capacity to undermine important Chinese interests. Some Chinese policy makers nevertheless continued to believe that leaders in Pyongyang would ultimately need to move toward normal, productive relations with the outside world. The longer-term question for China was the entry fee that North Korea would have to pay to enable such a transition, but for the present this issue remains unaddressed by Beijing. Other Chinese officials also remained wary of U.S. strategic intentions, arguing that a workable relationship with leaders in the North could inhibit U.S. pursuit of more expansive goals in Northeast Asia. But China confronted the reality of an isolated, vulnerable regime still trapped in the past, and at best a needy and unreliable neighbor. China thus deemed the North an unpleasant burden but not an excessive one, relative to the possibilities of overt hostility or instability that isolation of Pyongyang might trigger.

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<sup>38</sup> For a detailed overview of Chinese leadership deliberations during 2009, see *Shades of Red: China's Debate Over North Korea*, Seoul, Beijing, and Brussels, International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 179, 2 November 2009.

<sup>39</sup> This section draws on discussions with Chinese analysts and officials during visits to Beijing in 2009 and 2010 and additional interactions with Chinese scholars and diplomats.

<sup>40</sup> For a discerning assessment of recent Chinese internal debate about the DPRK, consult Heungkyu Kim, "From a buffer zone to a strategic burden: evolving Sino-North Korea relations during the Hu Jintao era", *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 22, No. 1, March 2010, pp. 57-74.

An alternative and far more pessimistic view (expressed primarily by policy analysts) saw worrisome consequences in continued acquiescence to North Korean behavior. Though this did not represent a dominant view, it received a hearing at higher levels. The persistence of harsh assessments of the DPRK in authoritative publications suggested that some senior officials sanctioned such appraisals, and were thus not unconditionally supportive of North Korean policy. As various Chinese analysts noted, Pyongyang's nuclear defiance placed U.S.-China relations under stress and had the potential to trigger a larger regional crisis. The North's actions also inhibited orderly economic development in China's northeastern provinces, whose progress lagged behind the country's far more dynamic coastal regions. These critics saw the dominant threats to the DPRK as internal, not external: the regime's depictions of dire security threats were rationalizations to justify leadership goals, not an objective depiction of North Korea's strategic circumstances.

But Chinese analysts (even those highly critical of the North) did not exempt the United States from their critiques. Inconsistencies and outright contradictions had long bedeviled U.S. strategy toward North Korea, oscillating between alarm, contempt, and outright neglect. In President Bush's first term, Chinese officials had also been openly skeptical of U.S. intelligence claims about the DPRK's nuclear activities, though this skepticism dissipated as evidence of North Korea's weapons development accumulated. When the Bush Administration shifted toward direct negotiations with Pyongyang following the North's first nuclear detonation, it became a major test case of U.S.-China cooperation. But Chinese policy makers did not want to curtail their freedom of action, or appear overly beholden to American policy preferences.

Despite North Korea's renewed truculence, senior Chinese officials were not prepared to risk an outright break with Pyongyang or to foreclose the possibility of the DPRK's return to negotiations. A consensus emerged in Beijing that the price tag associated with stabilizing the North Korean economy and sustaining relations with the North was tolerable, especially when compared to the alternatives. Chinese officials still seemed persuaded that a more flexible stance by Washington would elicit requisite concessions from North Korean leaders, but they also understood that Pyongyang had to convey at least some interest in renewed negotiation. In September 2009, senior foreign policy trouble shooter Dai Bingguo traveled to the DPRK, where he exchanged views with Kim Jong Il. Dai had first met with Kim when U.S.-North Korea relations were in a deep crisis in early 2003, when he elicited concessional language and actions from the North Korean leader. Additional trips undertaken by Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and of Defense Minister Liang Guanglie in successive months following Dai's visit were the highest level Chinese visitors to the DPRK since the first nuclear test.

China used these visits to redefine longer-term relations with the DPRK, entailing an uneasy balance among multiple, potentially divergent

Chinese interests.<sup>41</sup> First, Beijing saw the continued necessity of providing a lifeline to Pyongyang. Wen Jiabao signed agreements on economic and technological collaboration for infrastructural projects, including a new bridge to be built across the Yalu. Beijing was seeking to stabilize economic conditions in the DPRK and indirectly incubate internal change in the North, without triggering suspicions in Pyongyang over potential Chinese economic control. These accords also solidified China's dominant position with various state-run trading companies that oversaw large-scale projects in the North.<sup>42</sup>

Second, China sought to limit its long-standing, if largely dormant, security obligations to the DPRK, with ties now defined as "friendly cooperative relations," not a military alliance. As a Chinese military researcher observed in a subsequent commentary, the bilateral relationship entailed "relations of friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance," but "there is no permanent body like a joint headquarters between China and the DPRK, nor is there any joint combat plan, and still less are joint military exercises conducted."<sup>43</sup> Chinese leaders did not want to be associated with or obligated to unilateral actions that Pyongyang might undertake. Third, Beijing continued to emphasize that it did not accept the legitimacy or permanence of a North Korean nuclear capability. It wanted to induce North Korea's return to nuclear diplomacy, hoping to elicit sufficient gestures from Kim for Washington to send a senior emissary to Pyongyang.

Heightened economic and technical cooperation with the North, however, prompted immediate questions about China's readiness to enforce UN sanctions. Security Council Resolution 1874 had called upon all member states "not to enter into new commitments for grants, financial assistance or concessional loans to [the DPRK] ... except for humanitarian and developmental purposes directly addressing civilian needs." The sanctions were targeted against "nuclear-related or ballistic missile-related or other WMD-related programmes [sic] or activities."<sup>44</sup> China insisted that its actions were fully congruent with the resolution, but Wen Jiabao's remarks after returning to Beijing were defensive in tone. The Prime Minister declared that China's economic assistance was "*mainly* used for developing the DPRK's economy and improving the people's livelihood. *This is in line with the spirit of the resolutions of the UN Security Council.* All the efforts made by the Chinese side are to promote the Six-Party Talks process, promote the realization of the denuclearization of the Korean

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<sup>41</sup> For more details, see Jonathan D. Pollack, "China's North Korea Conundrum: How to Balance a Three Legged Stool", *YaleGlobal Online*, 23 October 2009, available at: <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu>.

<sup>42</sup> John S. Park, *North Korea, Inc.: Gaining Insights into North Korean Regime Stability from Recent Commercial Activities*, Washington, United States Institute of Peace Working Paper, 22 April 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Col. Wang Yisheng of the China Academy of Military Science, as quoted in "Military Diplomacy Creates a Peaceful Periphery", *Liaowang*, No. 48, 30 November 2009, p. 34.

<sup>44</sup> Security Council, SC/9679, *op.cit.*, available at: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/sc9679.doc.htm>.

Peninsula, and to help maintain lasting peace and stability in Northeast Asia.”<sup>45</sup>

China's basic policies toward the North have persisted since Wen's visit, with a particular emphasis on economic collaboration. This has included mutual visits by senior officials, initial construction of several hydroelectric dams along the Yalu, and increased Chinese investment in North Korea (including securing a ten year lease to port facilities in Rajin).<sup>46</sup> As of mid-April 2010, a long rumored visit of Kim Jong Il to China has yet to materialize. Should this visit take place, most analysts anticipate that Kim will table requests for urgently needed economic assistance, with Kim presumably reciprocating with a hedged statement of North Korea's willingness to return to the Six Party Talks.<sup>47</sup> Thus, Beijing continues to believe that Pyongyang will ultimately consent (at least in tentative form) to renewed multilateral diplomacy, though its preference for a bilateral channel with Washington remains uppermost in its calculations.

### ***Continuing Uncertainties***

China's incentive-oriented strategy and America's constraint-based strategy did not reflect a division of labor, and suggested continued policy divergence between Beijing and Washington. The dominant objective of U.S. policy has been to limit North Korea's room for maneuver, constrain its policy options, and compel an unequivocal strategic choice by Pyongyang. The Obama Administration has also sought to broaden and deepen policy coordination among those opposed to North Korean nuclear weapons development. Enhanced Chinese economic assistance to the DPRK and a stronger political relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang thus seemed at cross purposes to U.S. goals, should the North conclude that its ties with China insulate it from acute political pressure. Beneath a veneer of cautious optimism, however, Wen Jiabao acknowledged the tentativeness of any understandings with the North, declaring that the window for renewed diplomacy could prove fleeting. Indeed, only a week before Wen's visit a DPRK Foreign Ministry spokesperson declared that dismantlement of the North's nuclear capabilities was “unthinkable ... it is [also] unimaginable to expect the DPRK to return to the NPT as a non-nuclear state.”<sup>48</sup>

Kim Jong Il, however, understood the need to accommodate to Chinese expectations, tactically if not strategically. In his final conversation with Wen Jiabao prior to the Prime Minister's departure, Kim edged away from the North's unequivocal opposition to renewed multilateral talks, declaring the North's “readiness to hold multilateral talks, depending on the outcome of the DPRK-U.S. talks.” But his commitment was conditional and

<sup>45</sup> Beijing, *CCTV-4* in Mandarin, 10 October 2009. Emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> “China Upping Investment in North Korea but Success of Development Projects Uncertain,” *Kyodo Clue III Online*, 1 April 2010, available at: <http://clue3.kyodonews.jp>.

<sup>47</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “North Korea Is Said to Be Seeking China's Aid”, *The New York Times*, 3 April 2010.

<sup>48</sup> “DPRK's Will to Strive for Building Nuclear-free World Reiterated”, 30 September 2009, available at: <http://www.kcna.co.jp>.

hedged, since Kim also asserted that progress in bilateral talks was premised on the cessation of “hostile relations” between Washington and Pyongyang, with North Korea free to employ this elastic label as it saw fit.<sup>49</sup> The Obama Administration did not want to reinvent the wheel with North Korea, or to again permit Pyongyang to break free from negotiated commitments. Washington had already conveyed its willingness to “engage bilaterally ... with the North Koreans, but only in the context of the Six-Party process and in order to facilitate the Six-Party exercise.”<sup>50</sup> The U.S. had no interest in enabling Pyongyang to continue its weapons programs without consequence, or to again be enveloped in inconclusive, open-ended bilateral talks with the North. Despite U.S. wariness, Kim’s remarks were deemed sufficient for Ambassador Bosworth to visit Pyongyang in December.

The United States saw renewed engagement with Pyongyang as a means to an end, not an end in itself. North Korean actions in the first half of 2009 had directly challenged the policy framework within which the United States and others sought to cap and reverse the North’s nuclear program. U.S. policy left open the possibilities for renewed economic and energy assistance to the DPRK and exploration of normal relations between Pyongyang and all participants in the Six Party Talks. But such steps presumed North Korea’s readiness to undertake binding restraints on its nuclear development.

The DPRK remained in open violation of the agreements signed in Beijing. The United States therefore insisted on Pyongyang’s unequivocal return to its prior commitments, even as North Korea insisted that its primary interest was in a peace treaty with Washington and the lifting of sanctions.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, only days following Ambassador Bosworth’s departure from Pyongyang, Thailand detained a transport aircraft loaded with North Korean conventional arms shipments, most likely headed to Iran but probably destined for transfer elsewhere in the Middle East.<sup>52</sup> The seizure of these weapons was an undoubted success in the sanctions regime. It reinforced Secretary of State Clinton’s previous statement of U.S. policy: “Current sanctions will not be relaxed until Pyongyang takes verifiable, irreversible steps toward complete denuclearization. Its leaders should be

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<sup>49</sup> “Wen Jiabao, Kim Jong Il Hold Talks, Reach ‘Important Consensus’ in Pyongyang”, *Xinhua* (Domestic Service in Chinese), 5 October 2009. Kim’s use of the phrase “hostile relations”, as opposed to the DPRK’s customary reference to the “U.S. hostile policy” seemed less accusatory as well, since he did not hold the United States exclusively responsible for existing circumstances.

<sup>50</sup> Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, Morning Walkthrough in Seoul, Republic of Korea, 6 September 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Yoshihiro Makino, “North Korea Demands U.S. Lifting of UN Sanctions as Condition to Return to Six-Party Talks”, *Asahi Shimbun*, 2 January 2010, available at: <http://www.asahi.com>.

<sup>52</sup> Donald Kirk, “North Korea weapons: How much slips through?”, *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 December 2009; and Thomas Fuller and David E. Sanger, “Officials Seek Destination of North Korean Arms”, *The New York Times*, 14 December 2009.

under no illusion that the United States will ever have normal, sanctions-free relations with a nuclear-armed North Korea.”<sup>53</sup>

By year's end, the DPRK had pulled back from its more extreme statements and threatened actions of the spring, but without wavering from its claimed status as a nuclear state. In the 2010 annual joint New Year's Day editorial in Pyongyang's major newspapers, North Korea reverted to language characteristic of earlier rounds of diplomacy: “The fundamental problem in guaranteeing the peace and stability of the Korean peninsula and the region today is putting an end to the hostile relationship between the DPRK and the United States. Our position to provide a solid peace regime on the Korean peninsula and realize denuclearization through dialogue and negotiations remains consistent.”<sup>54</sup> But North Korea still sought to pocket its nuclear advances and avoid any major costs or consequences for having walked away from its prior obligations. The United States insisted that any exploration of enhanced bilateral relations would require Pyongyang's return to denuclearization in both word and deed. Three basic questions loomed. First, what tools were available to the Obama Administration to achieve what had eluded its predecessors? Second, how could the United States deny North Korea any presumed political and strategic gains from its open claim to nuclear status? Third, what were the possible responses if the North again exploited a negotiating window to advance goals in nuclear and missile development?

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<sup>53</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Remarks at the United States Institute of Peace, Washington, 21 October 2009.

<sup>54</sup> Joint Editorial of *Rodong Sinmun* and other lead North Korean newspapers, *Korean Central Broadcasting Station*, 1 January 2010.



# Pending Policy Choices

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Since the Korean nuclear issue first emerged as a major U.S. policy concern in the early 1990s, successive administrations have grappled with widely divergent policy choices. The most contentious issues have been the degree of perceived risk to U.S. interests, the urgency of these risks, and the spectrum of options to mitigate or eliminate these dangers. The aspirational agreements of earlier years (i.e., the DPRK's signing of the NPT and the North-South nuclear accords) did not prevent the North's steady advance toward fissile material production. Parallel efforts at missile manufacture and export also continued, unimpeded by any binding constraints on such activities. Though there were periodic calls for preventive attacks against North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities from various quarters of American elite opinion and (on occasion) from U.S. policy makers, such possibilities were repeatedly rejected as infeasible and likely to entail extremely high risks. American officials have often asserted that all options remain "on the table", but for all intents and purposes the U.S. has been self-deterred. This left two questions unanswered. First, could the United States reach negotiated understandings with the DPRK and hold North Korea to its obligations? Second, what additional tools could constrain the potential dangers to the United States, its regional allies, and to the non-proliferation regime as a whole?

U.S. thinking on these questions has repeatedly oscillated between coercive and incentive-based strategies, without reconciling these divergent approaches. Coercive options posit that even a minimal North Korean nuclear capability poses unacceptable risks to the vital interests of the United States, its regional allies, and to the non-proliferation regime. By contrast, incentive or reassurance-based options presume that inducements might ultimately convince the DPRK leadership to forego their nuclear and missile programs. But can incentives and constraints be integrated in a single strategy? Under the Agreed Framework, the United States sought to combine reassurance with steps to halt the North's ongoing plutonium program and for the DPRK to cease its efforts to complete far larger plutonium producing reactors. As noted previously, the Agreed Framework bought time, but deferred definitive resolution of the DPRK's past nuclear activities and postponed any dismantlement of its extant capabilities. Though it prevented a near-term crisis and mothballed the North's plutonium-based activities, it constituted an open-ended rental

agreement, with more definitive policy results anticipated only at the concluding stages of a very long-term process.<sup>55</sup>

### ***Revisiting Past Approaches***

The fullest effort to reconcile incentive and constraint-based policy strategies occurred late in the Clinton Administration. In October 1999, former Defense Secretary Perry proposed a step-by-step approach, whereby North Korea (in exchange for various U.S. inducements and assurances) would end its nuclear and missile programs.<sup>56</sup> The first path presumed negotiations with the North aimed at the “complete and verifiable” cessation of its nuclear and missile activities. The Perry report also posed an alternative possibility “if North Korea rejects the first path.” In the latter event, “it will not be possible to pursue a new relationship with the DPRK ... [and] the United States and its allies would have to take other steps to assure their security and contain the threat” [that the U.S. was] “unable to eliminate through negotiation.”

The Perry review clarified U.S. policy options, while trying to provide incentives for the DPRK to resolve ongoing disputes about its nuclear and missile activities and to encourage the North to dismantle its programs. Though the U.S. threat to contain and inhibit North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs was explicitly mentioned in the report, in the unclassified version the threat was held in reserve. U.S. policy makers decided to focus primarily on inducements rather than punishment. The DPRK was thus able to defer U.S. efforts to address the North’s retained inventory of fissile material. The Perry review achieved closure in policy debate for the remainder of the Clinton Administration and for a time led the DPRK to suspend additional long-range missile tests, but it did not clarify how or when the United States would determine that North Korea had not opted for the “preferred path.” It also left unstated (at least publicly) the specific measures that the United States would need to consider in the event that North Korea persisted with its weapons programs.

### ***Disdain amidst Division: North Korea Policy under the Bush Administration***

The Bush Administration failed to reconcile these competing policy alternatives. It was bedeviled from the outset by major internal differences over DPRK policy. Numerous senior officials had a deep distaste for the Agreed Framework and for North Korea more generally. When the U.S. intelligence community concluded in the summer of 2002 that Pyongyang had undertaken a covert uranium enrichment program apart from its extant plutonium capabilities, the administration moved decisively and quickly to alter U.S. policy. The administration’s insistence on the “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement” (CVID) of the North’s nuclear

<sup>55</sup> Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Poneman, and Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, Washington, Brookings Institution Press, 2004.

<sup>56</sup> *Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea-Findings and Recommendations*, Unclassified Report by Dr. William J. Perry, U.S. North Korea Policy Coordinator and Special Advisor to the President and the Secretary of State, Washington, 12 October 1999.

weapons programs as an initial U.S. expectation rendered negotiations all but irrelevant. The cessation of energy assistance to the North removed one of the principal constraints on resumption of the North's plutonium-based program. U.S. actions led the DPRK to reprocess the spent fuel rods frozen under the Agreed Framework, renew active weapons development, and ultimately conduct its first nuclear test. Though Pyongyang paid a political cost for its actions (especially in relations with China and to a lesser extent in inter-Korean relations), the Bush Administration did not have a fallback option when Pyongyang openly defied U.S. warnings and opted to test.

U.S. policy in President Bush's second term involved a return to negotiations, with a first order goal of preventing additional production of weapons grade plutonium and shuttering the Yongbyon reactor. The divisions within the Bush Administration (though less stark than in the first term) constituted a continuing impediment to U.S. policy making. Policy negotiations were as much internal to the administration as they were with Pyongyang. In contrast to the "back end" benefits postulated under the Agreed Framework, the administration pursued more of a "front end" strategy that would furnish evidence of an immediate return on longer-term goals, with the U.S. pledging in parallel to remove financial sanctions to which Pyongyang had long objected. For a time in 2007 and 2008, it appeared that the policy results (in particular the North's provision of data on reactor operations at Yongbyon, the DPRK's estimate of its plutonium inventory, and progress toward disablement of the Yongbyon facility) would validate this alternative approach. But Pyongyang balked at binding written assurances on verification in the final months of the Bush Administration and demonstrated no interest in pursuing a larger negotiated breakthrough. It also began to make claims to status as a nuclear state, presaging its defiant moves of the first half of 2009. Under such circumstances, additional steps to remove financial sanctions remained in limbo.

Thus, nearly twenty years after the North Korean nuclear issue first emerged as a major concern of U.S. policy makers, the core U.S. political and security objectives remain unrealized. Despite its acute economic failings and its degraded industrial capabilities, the North has sustained and enhanced its capacity for nuclear weapons development. The unknowns about the possible status of any enrichment activities further complicate this picture. North Korea's decision to walk away from nuclear diplomacy and to depict its future as a nuclear-armed state also compelled the Obama Administration (in conjunction with other participants in the Six-Party Talks) to revisit prevailing assumptions about continued engagement with the DPRK.

Senior U.S. officials viewed the North's renewed nuclear defiance as a critical inflection point in regional security and in non-proliferation policy, warranting a commensurate, coordinated response. As seen by the United States, the DPRK retained the technical and material means to advance its weapons programs and (barring its unequivocal return to prior obligations) it was not subject to any binding restraints on its nuclear behavior. North Korea's future nuclear development would thus depend on

three principal factors: its continued economic and industrial viability; the longer-term effects of the sanctions regime on weapons development; and the regime's judgment of the political and strategic costs of its nuclear activities.

### ***Devising a North Korea Policy***

Five fundamental considerations are at stake in North Korea's continued pursuit of nuclear weapons: (1) the potential implications of a more nuclearized security environment for international security and defense planning in Northeast Asia as a whole; (2) the potential precedents created by the North's "breakout" from the non-proliferation regime; (3) the possible transfer by Pyongyang of nuclear materials, technology or knowhow to third parties; (4) the risks of internal instability in the DPRK while the North still retains possession of nuclear weapons; and (5) the dangers of a breakdown of deterrence on the Korean peninsula, triggering a major regional crisis.<sup>57</sup> All five issues represent major concerns of U.S. policymakers, but they are not issues for the United States alone.

Pyongyang opted to resume pursuit of nuclear weapons because it did not perceive major costs to doing so, and because North Korea deemed retention of nuclear weapons preferable to a future without them. In response, the United States sought to sharpen the choices confronting North Korean policy makers. As described by Stephen Bosworth, a decision by the North to forego nuclear weapons development was a "strategic decision" for Pyongyang to make, to which the United States was not privy: "Our task ... is to try to inform that [strategic] process in such a way that they [the DPRK's leaders] come to conclude that they are able to give up their nuclear weapons and ... through dialogue [to] guide them to the right kind of decision ... we are not prepared to negotiate with them now with North Korea ... as a nuclear weapons state ... But the point of engagement ... is to try to change the other side's view of its own self-interest ... sketching out to them the kind of bilateral relationship we could have, always provided that North Korea proceeds down this road to denuclearization."<sup>58</sup>

Washington sought Pyongyang's return to the negotiating process, but it was not prepared to compensate North Korea for steps that it was already obligated to undertake. Absent unambiguous evidence of policy change by North Korea, the United States would maintain the existing sanctions regime and defer consideration of political or economic benefits to the DPRK. An aid-based strategy remained prospective, with the possible exception of renewed humanitarian assistance. The administration has stated its expectations of Pyongyang, supplanting ambiguous or partial policy formulas. It also sought to limit any possibility for Pyongyang to exploit differences within the coalition opposed to North Korean nuclear development. But it confronts the challenge of dealing with a nuclear-armed

<sup>57</sup> For additional discussion, see Pollack, "Kim Jong-il's Clenched Fist", *op. cit.*, pp. 166-170.

<sup>58</sup> Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, *On the Record Briefing*, *op. cit.*

North Korea, without wanting to confer legitimacy or implying acquiescence to these capabilities.

Korean denuclearization remains a fundamental U.S. goal, but it requires a strategy that is attentive to the full range of longer-term possibilities on the peninsula, including uncertainties associated with North Korea's political and economic future. Despite the DPRK's repeated claims of economic and technological advance as it approaches the centenary of Kim Il Sung's birth in 2012, the system is under acute and growing stress. Kim Jong Il's death (or lasting incapacitation) will mark only the second passage of supreme power in North Korean history. Notwithstanding its nuclear breakthroughs, the DPRK is far less institutionally robust than at the time of Kim Il Sung's death. The prospect of an increasingly vulnerable system in which the power of the center is less determinative is fraught with risk and uncertainty. All involved powers could be approaching uncharted territory, underscoring the need for prudent planning and confidential deliberations on an array of "what if" possibilities.

Even if North Korea again makes a commitment to return to the Six Party process, the United States seeks to redefine the goals of any prospective negotiations. This will require full collaboration between the United States and other participants at the Six Party Talks, in particular with China and the ROK. The United States has four broad objectives at present: (1) determining North Korea's willingness to restrain and reverse its nuclear weapons development, beginning with the verifiable cessation of all fissile material production; (2) making explicit the costs and consequences for North Korea if it persists with its nuclear activities; (3) weighing appropriate incentives and assurances if Pyongyang demonstrates a serious commitment to denuclearization; and (4) enhancing alternative policy measures if the North does not forego its nuclear goals. Though the North's nuclear arsenal remains rudimentary, the existence of these capabilities constitutes an inherent risk to U.S. vital interests and an open challenge to the non-proliferation regime. Uncertainty about the system's longer-term prospects adds an additional and equally consequential factor in all future policy deliberations.

Prevailing attitudes in the Obama Administration toward North Korea remain very cautionary. The United States understands that it could face an open-ended nuclear impasse with Pyongyang. The longer the DPRK retains or enhances its nuclear capabilities and reiterates its claim to status as a nuclear-armed state, the more difficult it becomes for the regime to forego its weapons potential and inventory of completed weapons. Moreover, with the exception of China, various neighboring countries and the United States remain primarily engaged in deliberations and consultations *about* North Korea, not negotiations *with* North Korea. But this underscores the need for a larger strategy that transcends denuclearization.



# Concluding Observations

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After two decades of indecision and repeated policy debate, the senior U.S. foreign policy leadership is closer to a policy consensus on the North Korean nuclear issue than at any previous time. The Obama Administration has conveyed to Pyongyang that nuclear weapons will deny North Korea the possibility of sustained relations with the outside world, assuming that it seriously desires such ties. Washington has made clear to North Korea and to the DPRK's Northeast Asian neighbors that the United States will not pursue a normal or quasi-normal relationship with the DPRK as long as Pyongyang remains in possession of nuclear weapons.

Washington's messages have thus far fallen on deaf ears in Pyongyang. The DPRK has not demonstrated that it is prepared to conceptualize a strategic future without nuclear weapons on terms that are remotely acceptable to the United States. Its aspirations to strategic autonomy are symptomatic of the isolation, vulnerability, and exceptionalism of the North Korean system. Pyongyang's pronouncements exude unbounded confidence about its longer-term prospects, but these seem more the assertions of the core elite, not a credible representation of North Korea's future options. DPRK is a beleaguered, brittle system. Authoritative statements describe its strategic goal as "the magnificent goal of opening up the gate to a powerful state in 2012," coinciding with the centenary of the birth of Kim Il Sung and the prospective date for the public designation of Kim Jong Un as Kim Jong Il's successor.<sup>59</sup> But "opening up the gate" is more metaphor than policy. Leadership actions and statements convey the center's fears of losing economic control, and its determination to reassert state dominance. The leadership relies on external threats to maintain its unquestioned power and prerogatives, but this cannot be an answer for what ails North Korea.

In a December 2009 visit to a steel complex that had supposedly achieved major technological breakthroughs, Kim Jong Il characterized the purported metallurgical accomplishments as "a victory greater than [a] third successful nuclear test."<sup>60</sup> This could be an oblique hint that the DPRK

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<sup>59</sup> Joint New Year's Day editorial of *Rodong Sinmun* and other lead North Korean publications, Korean Central Broadcasting Station, 1 January 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Kim's remarks at the Songjin Steel Complex are cited in Korea Central News Agency in English, 19 December 2009, available at: <http://www.kcna.co.jp>; see also the comments of Kim Yong Nam (Politburo Member, President of the Supreme People's Assembly Presidium, and nominal Chief of State): "The great success of our-style iron and steel-making methods...is a great immortal victory of

believes that it possesses a proven, tested design for a nuclear warhead, implicitly making it invulnerable to any possible coercive strategy. If nuclear weapons are deemed of such singular strategic value, relinquishing this capability seems exceedingly unlikely, especially as viewed by the political and security elites at the apex of state power. As a recent statement noted, “our country ... [has] demonstrated its invincible and majestic appearance as a country that manufactures and launches artificial earth satellites and a country that has nuclear weapons in its possession.”<sup>61</sup> This is not a message that suggests a readiness to forego its weapons capabilities.

But there are other possible implications. For example, the New Year's Day editorial, an annual indicator of policy priorities, argues that the DPRK must now focus its efforts on improving the living standards of its citizens. The editorial asserts that the country (“already a politico-ideological and military power”) must now aspire to “the status of an economic giant.”<sup>62</sup> A 9 January article in *Rodong Sinmun* quoted an extraordinary admission from Kim Jong Il: “In the past, the leader [Kim Il Sung] always said he wished to feed our people with rice and meat soup, clothe them in silk, and let them live in tile-roofed houses. But we haven't yet fulfilled his wishes. I will do everything to let our people live a content life by improving their lives in the shortest period possible.”<sup>63</sup> There have been previous times when such goals have been enunciated and never pursued, but the statement's explicitness bespeaks a tacit admission of profound systemic failure.

The North Korean regime has long justified its legitimacy and claims to absolute power based on military strength. It insists that it possesses “independent guts ... on which no pressure or threat of any kind works,” and asserts that its people envy no one.<sup>64</sup> Is it imaginable that this bedrock conviction could change? This judgment is not warranted under prevailing circumstances. But we should not automatically assume an incapacitated system as the North confronts its acute economic liabilities and approaches the transfer of power.

To some analysts, this latter consideration raises the possibility of a strategic transition without comprehensive denuclearization. Advocates of incentive-based strategies assert that denuclearization could be gradual and phased, and should not preclude various forms of engagement that would foster a longer term transformation within the DPRK. Such an approach implies a U.S. readiness “to live with but not accept a *de facto*

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the chuch'e idea and is a more stunning demonstration of national power than that of [a] third nuclear test.” *Korean Central Television*, 25 December 2009.

<sup>61</sup> “A Great Leap Brought Forth to the Science and Technology Front”, *Pyongyang Central Broadcasting System*, 24 March 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Joint Editorial, *op. cit.*

<sup>63</sup> *Rodong Sinmun*, 9 January 2010, as cited in *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 11 January 2010, available at: <http://english.chosun.com>.

<sup>64</sup> Ri Tong Ch'an, Pang So'ng Hwa, and Kim Sun Yo'ng, “Let Us Drink a Toast on the Frontline of Victory”, *Rodong Sinmun*, 30 December 2009, available at: <http://dprkmedia.com>.

nuclear North Korea for some time.”<sup>65</sup> But the United States and North Korea's neighbors are unprepared to confer legitimacy or permanence to the North's nuclear weapons, and Washington does not want to again allow Pyongyang to walk away from obligations it had already undertaken.

North Korea's nuclear capabilities *do* exist and the United States openly acknowledges their existence, underscoring the need to manage the risks and wherever possible to inhibit the North from additional nuclear advances. As outlined in the April 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, the alterations in U.S. nuclear weapons policy do not extend to states in default of their non-proliferation obligations. This necessitates “maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent and reinforcing regional security architectures with missile defenses and other conventional military capabilities, [thereby] ... reassur[ing] our non-nuclear allies and partners ... of our security commitments to them and [to] confirm that they do not need nuclear weapons capabilities of their own.” These pledges are closely paired with efforts to enhance the non-proliferation regime, including “reversing the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran” and “impeding illicit nuclear trade.”<sup>66</sup> Though not guaranteeing a solution anytime soon, these measures are designed to limit the DPRK's weapons potential and to deny the North any political or strategic standing from its nuclear activities.

Despite the DPRK's persistent economic dysfunction, its durability and resilience should not be discounted; the system cannot be wished away. At the same time, North Korea remains wholly unresponsive to recent U.S. policy formulations. In reaction to release of the Nuclear Posture Review, for example, Pyongyang has forcefully reaffirmed its pursuit of nuclear weapons. The DPRK as asserted that “as long as the United States' nuclear threat continues, we will, in the future, increase and modernize various types of nuclear weapons for deterrence as much as is deemed necessary. We have sufficient capability to do so. The United States is giving us the reason and justification to do as such.”<sup>67</sup>

The Obama Administration does not discount North Korea's insistence that it will continue to pursue weapons development. U.S. officials speak of the need for “strategic patience,” in the expectation of an ultimate transition to leaders in the North who do not see their fundamental identity and interests deriving from retention of nuclear weapons. Under these circumstances, the United States continues to deny the North the benefits of engagement, even as it has reiterated the opportunities that would await the DPRK, if it chooses to avail itself of these possibilities. Consistency and clarity are thus essential elements in U.S. policy.

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<sup>65</sup> Wit, *U.S. Strategy Towards North Korea*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, Washington, Department of Defense, April 2010, pp. vi-vii.

<sup>67</sup> Statement of the DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Korean Central Broadcasting Station, 9 April 2010. The statement appears an oblique signal of heightened pursuit of uranium enrichment as an alternative means of fissile material production.

North Korea's longer-term viability and the extent of its interest in pursuing normal relations with the outside world hover over all these issues. It grimly persists with its own version of strategic patience. The United States remains acutely mindful of the ability of a small, needy nuclear-armed state to disrupt and endanger international security. It also recognizes that North Korea could establish a dangerous precedent for others who might contemplate such a course of action. A benign outcome to this open-ended saga is neither inevitable nor certain. Strategy toward North Korea must therefore be more than a test of wits and a test of wills. It remains incumbent on the United States and others to demonstrate and pursue shared convictions about a non-nuclear Korea, and to soberly pursue steps to advance this enduring goal.

U.S. policy must therefore operate at three levels. First, it must ensure maximal communication and coordination with all states intent on inhibiting the DPRK's nuclear development, so that no appreciable political space is created among them. Second, delegitimation of the North's claims to status as a nuclear state must be linked explicitly with assurance to Pyongyang of the opportunities for normal relations with the United States. Third, the U.S. must ensure that any steps toward denuclearization are definitive, irreversible, and verifiable. None of these measures constitutes a near-term strategic solution. Taken together, however, they can limit the risks of a larger crisis and diminish the possibilities of open-ended nuclear development on the peninsula.

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