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Northeast Asia: The Geopolitics of the Korean Nuclear Crisis

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THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE KOREAN NUCLEAR CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

U.S. unilateralism in rejecting the Sunshine Policy and North Korean unilateralism in seeking regime survival through nuclear weapons have forced Japan, South Korea, China, and Russia to agree to a multilateral approach to reduce threats to their interests. After making clear to the North its own preferred outcome, each has been in close touch with the United States in the hope that a compromise to the current nuclear crisis can be found. After the inconclusive three-way summit in Beijing in April 2003, Washington succeeded in drawing Tokyo and Seoul closer to its approach, and with close inspections of North Korean ships Tokyo grew more assertive. Anxious to avoid a nuclear Japan as well as greater U.S. dominance in Northeast Asia, China seeks a soft landing for North Korea that gives a boost to regionalism, from which it can gain economically and strategically. Pressed by Beijing, Pyongyang agreed at the start of August to six-party talks that will test any regional consensus as well as U.S. willingness to return to multilateralism. Tough negotiations lie ahead if a showdown is averted between North Korea and the United States.

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Introduction

The escalation of the U.S.-North Korean standoff that began in October 2002 constitutes the first 21st century conflict between a failed state relying on the threat of nuclear weapons and their proliferation to ensure regime survival, and a world power intent on preventing such flexing, blackmailing, and transfer of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to potential terrorists. The U.S.-North Korean crisis parallels the showdown between the United States and Iraq and raises heightened concern about the use of nuclear weapons. In addition, the situation in Northeast Asia poses a threat to South Korea and Japan (and the United States) if WMD-tipped artillery shells and missiles are fired across the North Korean border. The crisis bears close scrutiny as a measure of great power relations, in which the vital interests of four powers and the two Koreas intersect, while the shape of the emergent Northeast Asian region is at stake. Northeast Asia today stands on the brink of economic regionalism, but it lacks a stable balance of power and requisite confidence in security.

The current crisis was precipitated by a series of circumstances, the first of which is the totalitarian nature of the Kim Jong Il regime, which has resisted reform and remains isolated. This position was greatly exacerbated by the loss of support to North Korea from the Soviet Union, and as early as 1990 led to posturing about the use of WMD. The Agreed Framework ended the first nuclear crisis in 1994, but remained a shaky compromise in which both the United States and North Korea were suspicious of the other's commitment to the agreement. The incomplete implementation of the 1994 accord led to the missile development crisis of 1998, and a second agreement, which boosted the role of multilateral ties resulted from the Perry Process. The fragile progress of 2000, which was dominated by Kim Dae Jung's "sunshine policy," was stymied by uncertain expectations about U.S. cooperation. Thus, the seeds of crisis were present even before the Bush administration showed its disdain for the sunshine policy and South Korea moved from containment based on trust in the United States to appeasement based on emotional bonds with the North and multilateral great power diplomacy. The leadership in the North sought assurances of regime survival as well as massive economic assistance, while Americans found repugnant demands to yield to WMD extortion and willingness to support a state that tramples human rights.

Despite a number of options available to North Korea, its leadership was not satisfied with the limitations that accompanied them. In particular, the North Korean leadership opposed: 1) the South Korean "sunshine" option of family reunions, direct investment, national summits, and gradual reintegration through confederation; 2) the Chinese reform option of spe-

cial economic zones, market reforms, and gradual global integration with initial reliance on China's support; 3) the Japanese "reparations" option of returning abductees' families, allowing freedom of movement to Japanese spouses of Koreans who had been repatriated to the North, and cooperating on security, which would open the door to large-scale economic assistance in correspondence to what South Korea received in lieu of reparations payments; and 4) the Russian "megaprojects" option to bring in revenue through energy, transportation, and industrial corridors that would allow the state to maintain control without exposing the bulk of the population to the shocks of economic openness. In 2002, Pyongyang made some clumsy attempts at economic change, initiated price reforms, and announced a special economic zone at Shinuiju near China, but all of these options were too risky for a regime clinging to totalitarian methods.

Comprised of many officials who had condemned the Clinton administration's "timid" use of power, the Bush administration was divided on policy toward North Korea. Some who considered it desirable to prevent an unpredictable crisis or to assuage U.S. allies were inclined to stick closely to the framework left by Clinton. After George W. Bush branded North Korea part of the "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union speech, a new approach was set. Diplomatic flexibility was consequently reduced, leaving all four of the other active parties frustrated by the impact on their own strategies toward the North. For a time, Pyongyang explored new options with each of them. Yet with the United States refusing to engage North Korea none were able to advance their preferred solution. The North heard each, in turn, but it treated them as if they were only practice negotiations in preparation for the main event: discussions with the United States.

Debate began on October 3, 2002, when Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly accused the North of cheating on its nuclear promises during a visit to Pyongyang. The Kim Jong Il regime struck back by defiantly admitting to a uranium enrichment program. The crisis then escalated as Pyongyang repeatedly took provocative steps and resorted to bellicose language. Washington mostly soft-pedaled the danger while occasionally inserting a sober reminder about potential military options.

Four Parties Seeking to Shape U.S.-DPRK Relations

North Korea's neighbors have strong interests in the situation on the Peninsula and seek ways to influence developments there. Since 1950, China has linked its security to that of North Korea, in large part because of the country's proximity to Beijing. Once it had reestablished relations with South Korea in 1965, Japan reasserted its claim to have influence on the Korean Peninsula. After the Cold War, the Japanese quest to "reenter Asia" started

with a desire to shape the evolution of the Koreas. In the 1990s, Russians were frustrated by their country's loss of international status, pointing to exclusion from 1994 talks on North Korea as a symbol of this fall. It became a matter of urgency to regain influence, not only because of the proximity of North Korea to Vladivostok, but also because of an impression that the future of Russia's status as a power in Asia depends heavily on how the reunification of Korea is resolved. Finally, by the end of the 1990s, South Koreans had decided that they should play the leading role in the transformation of the North. When the Perry Process produced an agreement in September 1999 limiting North Korean missile testing, Pyongyang's neighbors took it as a green light to accelerate their own diplomacy. Once the Clinton administration had signaled its approval, the other four parties planned new approaches to Pyongyang to gain an advantage in shaping the evolution of the peninsula.

Russia as a Marginalized Player

Unexpectedly, Russia has played the most conspicuous role in meetings with Kim Jong Il since 2000. Russia gained visibility as the destination of two summer visits by Kim, a long train trip to Moscow in 2001 and a short summit in the Russian Far East in 2002. No less important, Vladimir Putin, who became identified as the only leader "trusted" by Kim, relayed Kim's message about an extended moratorium on missile testing to the G-7 meeting in Okinawa in 2000, and received the gratitude of Japan's Koizumi for facilitating the September 2002 summit. In January 2003, Putin sent an emissary to Pyongyang amidst expectations that the presence of a special bond could break the deadlock over the nuclear crisis.

If several years earlier Moscow's goals were primarily to regain influence in the region, the Vladivostok summit of late August 2002 focused on securing economic advantages. Putin had decided that the security of the Russian Far East was endangered by illegal Chinese immigration. Contrary to plans under discussion with China, Putin had also calculated that laying an oil pipeline from Angarsk east to Khabarovsk and south to Nakhodka, with possible future extension through the Korean Peninsula, would solidify Russia's hold on the territory. In addition, he focused on the "iron silk road" extension of the Trans-Siberian railway through the Korean Peninsula during talks with Kim Jong Il. Strongly encouraged by the governors of the Russian Far East, Putin linked the long-term security of the eastern third of his country to success in a soft landing for North Korea and economic reintegration of the peninsula in which the South would not be obsessed with absorbing the North.¹ The geography of the Far East puts its main cities and military assets on a line directly north of the Korean Peninsula,