

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,

giving Putin good reason to link its security with the two Koreas, while boosting ties with Japan and keeping China engaged but at bay.

The second Russian objective follows from the first. Not only does Putin want to prevent China from dominating the Russian Far East, he seeks a path to regionalism in Northeast Asia where Chinese power is contained. This means not only favoring more balance between China and Japan and a continued U.S. presence, but also steering the Korean Peninsula toward an outcome that makes no power stronger than the others. As the weakest power in the region, Russia prefers equilibrium and gradual reunification between North and South Korea that furthers balance among the great powers. Russia therefore treats North Korea as a lever for shaping regionalism. While a crisis is not welcome, neither is a collapse that would bring U.S. power even closer or sow chaos that could spill across the border.²

The effort to mediate by sending Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov to Pyongyang in January 2003 had economic and geopolitical objectives. With South Korean President Kim Dae Jung's approval, Losyukov discussed joint assistance to replace the KEDO nuclear reactors with hydroelectric plants. Resenting its exclusion from the 1994 reactor construction agreement, Moscow wants to ensure that its economic interests are represented. Yet, as Russia's relations with the United States worsened due to differences over Iraq, a third, more global, goal remained obvious: Putin wants to avoid any outcome by which U.S. power could become impervious to balancing forces. A process that aligned Japan and South Korea more closely with Russia might keep the United States in check.

Support from China was necessary to meet this last objective, and on May 27, 2003, Putin and President Hu Jintao declared that "scenarios of power pressure or the use of force to resolve the problems existing [in Korea] are unacceptable." They added:

[We] advocate the creation of a nuclear-free status of Korean Peninsula and observance there of the regime of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Simultaneously, the security of the DPRK must be guaranteed and favorable conditions must be established for its socio-economic development. The parties believe that the key to resolving the problems of Korean Peninsula is the political will of the parties involved to solve the crisis by political and diplomatic methods. The parties will continue a close cooperation in the interests of peace, stability and development on Korean Peninsula.³

While leaving no doubt about differences from the U.S. approach, this statement supports the Bush priority of removing nuclear weapons.

During the “white nights” summit of world leaders for St. Petersburg’s 300th anniversary, U.S.-Russian relations focused on overcoming differences over Iraq and on U.S. determination to stop Iran’s nuclear program, rather than the Korean crisis. It appeared that Russia was once again marginalized over Korea. The idea that Russia will benefit from active diplomacy premised on acceptance by the North has also been criticized. A leading Moscow expert on Korea argued that Russia would do better to give priority to the war against terrorism while pressing for integration with Northeast Asia, rather than seeking a role as friend of Pyongyang.⁴ After the war in Iraq strained relations with the United States and left some believing that Russia had overplayed its hand, Russians debated the utility of becoming more cooperative over Korea.⁵ Kim Jong Il’s extremism undercut Putin’s ambition for a mediating role, while Roh Moo Hyun’s pragmatic focus on the United States meant no meeting with Putin even when other leaders converged on St. Petersburg. Yet, when Pyongyang agreed to multilateral talks, it not only brought Moscow back into the picture but also had Moscow rather than Beijing make the announcement. If multilateralism is unavoidable, then Pyongyang wants Moscow there.

Japan’s Short- and Long-Term Interests

Japan’s interest in North Korea in the summer of 2002 is the result of plans that did not fare well after the nuclear crisis began. The Koizumi initiative that led to the summit of September 17, 2002 had a mixture of short-term and long-term calculations. In the short run, Koizumi sought a resolution to the issue of abducted Japanese that could give him a personal boost and raise Japan’s profile. Over the long run, he sought to establish Japan as a major actor in the jockeying over North Korea’s evolution.⁶ Japan also had urgent concern for its security. After North Korea fired a missile over Honshu Island in August 1998, many regarded North Korean missiles as the most serious threat to Japanese territory since World War II. The nuclear crisis intensified this alarm. In the buildup to the Pyongyang summit, some commentators posited that Japan was becoming a driving force on the peninsula while the United States, with its inflexible stance, had lost the initiative.⁷ However, Japan’s preoccupation with a dangerous North Korea as well as revulsion over the North’s admission of abductions of Japanese drove Japan closer to the United States, although it remained more anxious to pursue negotiations than risk the calamitous prospects of a military option.

Japan also regarded the outcome on the Korean Peninsula as vital to its objectives for regionalism. While many Japanese were optimistic about relations with South Korea in the aftermath of the 2002 World Cup, fears soon mounted that the South was drifting closer to China. By making itself

indispensable through economic assistance, Japan figured it would become more vital to the South's strategy for economic integration on the peninsula and would gain leverage to balance China. When the nuclear crisis put an end to Koizumi's initiative to Pyongyang, Tokyo had to concentrate on a third objective: balancing its strategic alliance with the United States and its ambitions to "reenter Asia."⁸ With talk of a partial withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea, Tokyo nervously eyed a breakdown in the regional security system. Under the threat of attack, ties to the United States became the paramount concern for Japan's leaders, even if nationalist voices espousing independent Japanese action were growing stronger.

As the crisis deepened, Japanese commentators of various political orientations took different positions on multilateral possibilities. Funabashi Yoichi of the *Asahi Shimbun* argued that since Chinese relations with the North were filled with tension, China was as likely to apply pressure as the United States. Although he noted that China has been slow to act because of debate raging in its foreign ministry, Funabashi held out hope that Beijing would suspend energy and food shipments to squeeze the North.⁹ Vociferous criticism of China, however, did not abate. The May 2002 Shenyang incident, when Chinese police forcibly removed North Korean refugees from Japan's consulate, had damaged China's reputation in Japan, despite reports that the Japanese ambassador had previously asked for Chinese help against refugees seeking diplomatic asylum and that China quickly allowed those who were arrested to leave the country¹⁰. During the nuclear crisis, some went out of their way to associate China with the North Korean threat, but most coverage credited Beijing with playing a positive role.¹¹

Many Japanese feared that the United States would risk military conflagration in order to achieve regime change in the North,¹² or desperately hoped that a breakthrough was within reach because of China's changing diplomacy.¹³ But foreign policy experts recognized that this dangerous time required closing ranks with the United States. Seeing the war in Iraq as a precursor to firmness against North Korea, Japan gave more backing to the preemptive U.S. attack than any other ally. In May 2003, Koizumi accepted the opportunity to go to the Crawford Ranch. He prudently refrained from stressing Japanese interest in making Pyongyang a good offer.¹⁴

The most important change among the other countries in Northeast Asia came after the April 23 three-way summit in Beijing, where Pyongyang flaunted its claim to have nuclear weapons. As the North's statements alarmed many in Japan, Koizumi tilted to the United States in increasing pressure. He decided to cut the flow of money or dual-use items to North Korea, and implemented a plan to inspect the 1,400 North Korean cargo ships that arrive in Japanese ports annually. While the Japanese govern-

ment was split between those who had embraced the Pyongyang summit and those who had demonized the North over the subsequent months, Koizumi decided that Japan's voice could best be heard inside the tent nudging the North.¹⁵ In June 2003, Japan was at the forefront with warnings and inspections of North Korean ships as the rhetoric from Pyongyang escalated about the retaliation that might be provoked by such actions.

China as a Key Player

China is also attentive to the impact of the nuclear crisis on relations with Japan, but China's leaders have an even more pressing concern. They see North Korea primarily through the lens of Taiwan. This means calculating how any outcome on the Korean Peninsula will affect China's own reunification ambitions, while at the same time fearing that sanctions against the North could be a precedent for sanctions against China in some future confrontation over Taiwan. The cross-Strait model of transition through economic integration also applies.¹⁶ When Pyongyang initiated economic reforms in the summer of 2002 that could have opened the way to a Chinese-style market transition, Beijing may have thought that its repeated encouragement of reform was at last being heard. Yet when the North announced the opening of a "free economic zone" on the border with the Liaodong peninsula, Beijing showed its displeasure by arresting the Chinese businessman managing the effort on charges of corruption.

For years, Chinese assessments had minimized the risk from North Korea's WMD programs, suggesting that patient engagement would work.¹⁷ Beijing insisted that U.S. pressure on the North would only result in more isolation and bluster. In the second half of the 1990s, when Beijing embraced the goal of multipolarity by means of great power triangles or quadrangles, the disquieting impact of the North on security may have served China's purposes.¹⁸ Already in late 1999, however, strategic thinking was changing. China started "smile diplomacy" toward Japan,¹⁹ supported regionalism in Northeast Asia, and even reconciled itself to the reality of greater U.S. power and less benefit from a strategic partnership with Russia. Meanwhile, China's ties with South Korea grew stronger. Fear of isolation after September 11 accelerated this shift in thinking about the North.

The crisis in Iraq solidified this shift in Beijing's thinking. Fearing that the United States would attack North Korea after it had disposed of Iraq's government, China began to consider a new regional strategy. Adding to Chinese disquiet was the impact on Japan of North Korea's nuclear threat, boosting the appeal of cooperation on missile defense with the United States and the potential for subsequent transfer to defend Taiwan. China bided its time as the United States appealed for its help. In March 2003, it

joined the UN Security Council coalition in resistance to a U.S. attack on Iraq. While relations with the United States had markedly improved since September 11, Chinese leaders feared that U.S. unilateralism could be turned against China and its claim to Taiwan.

While Beijing generally kept a low profile in the war against Iraq, it could not avoid being embroiled in the North Korean crisis. In addition to becoming the foremost issue in relations with the United States and the testing ground for rival notions of regionalism, policy toward North Korea brought to the fore the fundamental divide in Chinese politics. The Korean crisis worsened just as the leadership transition was under way from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao. Despite the transfer of power, Jiang retained the title of chairman of the Central Military Commission, making it hard for Hu to extend his leadership on the Korean crisis. While leading Chinese scholars and business leaders dismissed the North as a burden that threatened to damage relations with the United States, they could not be sure that the leadership would, if forced to choose, abandon the North.

As discussed in the China chapter in this volume, the argument for applying pressure on the North was gaining favor in March and April 2003. It held that China has traditionally been isolated in international relations, and has become more so since Japan and Russia strengthened their ties with the United States from the late 1990s. Since China is heading toward a full market economy and developing a middle-class with increasing democratic aspirations, it goes against its own interest if it allows a Stalinist state, with which it has little in common, to hold its foreign policy hostage.

If quiet pressure on Pyongyang and U.S. willingness to talk with the North in the trilateral setting in Beijing gave the reformers some of what they wanted, a more serious test of China's political divide loomed as the crisis continued.²⁰ Chinese officials wanted to broker an agreement over the North that drew the countries of Northeast Asia together. Japan became critical to China's plans, as Chinese analysts saw convergence between a hardened U.S. position and Japan's skepticism of the North.²¹ After the "axis of evil" reference by Bush and talks between the Japanese and North Koreans, China sensed an opportunity to find a common multilateral language with the Japanese. The 30th anniversary of the reestablishment of relations between Beijing and Tokyo came in late September 2002, just after the Koizumi summit in Pyongyang. Yet the celebratory mood was soon overshadowed by the aftermath of the Kelly visit to Pyongyang and a free-fall in Japanese-North Korean relations. China grew increasingly alarmed over reactions in Japan over North Korea, though "new thinking" favored closer ties with Japan.²² To salvage regional security, Beijing had to be assertive toward Pyongyang but inviting toward Tokyo. Hu's meetings with Putin

and Bush on May 27 and June 1, 2003 offered a balance, chastising the North on nuclear weapons. These brief summits ratcheted up the pressure on the North, while leaving in doubt what China would do if it became North Korea's final lifeline should economic sanctions be imposed.

If the April 23 talks in Beijing won China credit for pressuring the North they also left many Chinese frustrated with Kim Jong Il's saber rattling. Growing trust of South Korea, alarm over the impact of the crisis in Japan, and awareness of benefits from reassuring the United States all led China to push for five-way talks with the North. Reports of Chinese debates on the crisis suggested a new determination to work with the United States.²³ In early August China reaped the gratitude of the other nations for activist diplomacy that brought the North to the table. Once the talks began China would likely be on the spot again in reconciling differences.

South Korea's Role

South Korea stood at the center of the vortex of these great power calculations. Under Kim Dae Jung's leadership from 1998, South Korea had fundamentally reevaluated its relations with each of the powers. In contrast to earlier reasoning that U.S. troops were the "tripwire" to keep the North from attacking, a new belief that Pyongyang's bluster was aimed at winning political and economic concessions to be used in a gradual reintegration process had spread in the South. Despite scant progress in cross-border dialogue, young South Koreans became convinced that their country's foremost goal is to engage their brethren to the North. An unprovoked North Korean naval attack that killed five Southern sailors in June 2002 did not change their minds. At the Pusan Games in September 2002, athletes and cheerleaders from the North were greeted euphorically. Riding high on confidence achieved by bringing democracy to their country and, in the flush of excitement over the successful hosting of the World Cup, young South Koreans eyed the power of engagement with the North idealistically. The first stages of the crisis did not change their thinking, as they voted in Roh Moo Hyun in December 2002.

Despite much that was written in Seoul, the summit of the Koreas on June 15, 2000 no longer appears to have been a decisive turning point. Secretly paying Kim Jung Il a reported \$500 million to receive Kim Dae Jung and to secure economic rights for one of the Hyundai companies, the South bought a desired symbol of progress without changing the psychology of the North. Family reunions proved to be a formalistic dud, long on tears, but absent any trust-building. After three years of economic projects, the North had yet to relax its tight controls. Refusing to offend the North's leadership by setting conditions for economic assistance, the South had little

leverage. When Roh was elected as prime minister he pledged more of the same, yet he soon was backtracking. Among the reasons were Pyongyang's failure to show restraint, the spillover from anti-Americanism, and a loss of confidence in South Korea by global investors.

Seoul also had a regional objective that was superseding its ties with Washington. This was apparent after September 11, when Kim Dae Jung was slow to support the United States and failed to send support for the war in Afghanistan. This regional goal could be observed in warming ties with the other powers in Northeast Asia, especially China, with which South Korea's bilateral trade reached \$40 billion in 2002. Lost in Seoul's obsessional attentiveness to Pyongyang was its simultaneous championing of regionalism. In this pursuit, Japan took second place to China, while Russia achieved political significance that belied its economic weakness. Of course, relations with the United States still had much significance, but demonstrations in favor of reducing or removing U.S. forces reinforced the extent of this thinking.

The voices of both Korean governments shaped the environment for great power maneuvering. On January 1, 2003, North Korea's major newspapers carried a joint editorial entitled "Let Us Fully Demonstrate the Dignity and Might of the DPRK." It called for "perfect unity" of the people, who "absolutely worship and follow their leader," "giving top priority to the army as firm as a rock," and holding high the banner of the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration.²⁴ It was a defiant assertion that the North needed no external assistance, while appealing to the South to join it against the United States. On February 25, Roh turned his inaugural address into a dual appeal for regionalism and trust-building through peaceful dialogue with the North. He insisted that the "age of Northeast Asia is fast approaching" and the Korean Peninsula is "a big bridge, linking China and Japan, the continent and the ocean."²⁵ Stating that nuclear development in the North can never be condoned and that the U.S. alliance has significantly contributed to his country's security and economic development, Roh also called for multilateralism through regional partners that recognize the South and the North as "the two main actors in inter-Korean relations."²⁶

Suspected of anti-Americanism and unable to win concessions from the North, Roh started his presidency with little credibility in a crisis that had devastating consequences. Foreign investment in South Korea fell precipitously (down to \$1.2 billion in the first quarter of 2003 from an average of about \$2.5 billion in previous quarters).²⁷ U.S. defense officials spoke of withdrawing forward-based troops, raising the chances of a U.S. military strike on the North with the South alone left to face the brunt of any military response. It became imperative for Roh to strengthen ties to the

United States, which culminated in a mid-May visit to Washington. Forgoing a joint news conference that would expose differences in their positions, Roh and Bush presented a united front in their appeal for the North to accept a non-nuclear peninsula. Without abandoning Seoul's offer of benefits if the North backed away from brinkmanship, experts in the South gravitated toward a mixed approach. They advocated concentrating on verified removal of nuclear weapons and expressed readiness to support sanctions if the North did not agree to a generous set of incentives.²⁸

Fearing that it would be left as an observer after the Iraq war and the disappointing three-way talks in Beijing, Seoul agreed to convey a joint message with the United States and Japan.²⁹ While reluctant to approve anything beyond "dialogue," even as Japan gave its assent to "pressure," Roh managed to convince Bush and Koizumi that he had shifted direction. Meanwhile, his supporters accused him of "kowtowing" to Bush and being humiliated by Japan's Diet, which on the day of his arrival in Tokyo (Korea's Memorial Day) passed an emergency bill granting the Japanese Self Defense Forces greater powers. Detractors, who control South Korea's main newspapers, insist that nobody trusts Roh because he has no intention of going beyond peaceful coexistence through exchanges with the North.³⁰

During the first half of 2003, the cumulative effects of the North's provocations, such as its announcement of withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) after expelling international inspectors and removing the seals at the Yongbyon nuclear facilities; its reactivation of the nuclear reactor there; its nullification of the 1992 North-South denuclearization agreement; and its admission that it possessed nuclear weapons, affected South Korea. There was also the economic impact from crisis on the peninsula and growing U.S. concern about the perceived anti-Americanism of the South Koreans and their new leadership. Finally, there was the effect of the quick U.S. success in Iraq allowing Washington to turn more attention to the Korean crisis.

By the time Roh went to Washington on May 14, much had changed (see the chapter on South Korea in this volume). With the North's economic situation further deteriorating, the South proceeded to link additional economic aid to progress in resolving the nuclear issue. When Koizumi met with Bush a week after the Bush-Roh meetings, triangular coordination was restored. Again, the North was warned that its conduct could lead to "further steps," hinting at economic sanctions if not the boarding of ships or even outright military action. After Roh's visit to Tokyo from June 6, meetings began to focus on ways to pressure the North economically. The Japanese were discussing ways to limit the flow of money from Koreans in Japan to the North, and the United States warned of tighter controls on ships from

the North. Even while Roh insisted that dialogue would work, intensifying pressure from his allies indicated a lack of confidence in diplomatic routes.

How Far Does Multilateralism Go?

Although it is too early at the time of writing (August 2003) to predict how this crisis will end, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions about how relations in the region are changing. U.S. and North Korean actions that were not welcomed by the other countries have forced some rethinking. Among China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea, there is some evidence of convergence. All strongly desire a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, even if they disagree on how much other priorities should be sacrificed for this goal. All welcome a boost in regional security ties, despite different strategies to achieve it. And all resent U.S. unilateralism, although Japan seems more tolerant since it has the least confidence in the diplomatic efforts of the others. Yet Japan and South Korea remain U.S. allies, with U.S. troops stationed on their soil, and the North's threat of targeting their people obliges them to draw closer to the U.S. position in the heat of crisis. This convergence will be tested if the danger from the North recedes. South Koreans are eager for multilateralism with a balancing role, and Japanese continue to seek a way to "reenter Asia" less dependent on the U.S.

Each envisions some sort of regionalism through a division of labor as a desired outcome of the crisis. Japan's offer of billions of dollars for a peace settlement and the South's sustained input of capital would boost economic integration, which would also be attractive to China and Russia because of new transportation routes and border trade. The reconstruction of the North's economy, fueled by market reforms and foreign economic ties, is seen across the region as giving a lift to the whole region. There appears to be a shared longing for regionalism as the outcome of the crisis.

Before that can occur, however, it is first necessary to determine how far the two principals will move toward multilateralism. With little information available on internal debates in Pyongyang, all nations have watched intently for signals from Washington. Messages from the administration after the three-way meeting with the North in Beijing were inconsistent. The United States scorned the North's offer to take only small steps in return for what might be a generous package of benefits. Then Secretary of State Colin Powell, "because of pressure from China, South Korea and Japan," referred to the Beijing session as "quite useful," indicating that continued diplomacy was ahead.³¹ Next came an op-ed piece by veterans of the first Bush administration, Brent Scowcroft and Arnold Kanter, calling the session "A Surprising Success on North Korea."³² Behind the confusion lay two distinct strategies—albeit with some overlap. On the one side are those

who praise U.S. patience in the face of provocations and insist that as long as the United States forges a consensus that the North cannot split, Pyongyang will back down.³³ On the other are those who intend to lean on China to make real the threat of economic sanctions (or blame it for abetting the North) amidst the growing likelihood of U.S. military action. The differences remained to be tested, first through coordination with the other parties in Northeast Asia, then through responses from the North. In the meantime, the United States has not given clear indications about how far it would proceed with multilateralism.

Some U.S. experts on Korea criticized “unilateral” policies as provoking and deepening the nuclear crisis while undermining U.S. relations with Northeast Asia. They called for a sequel to the 1994 agreement, leading this time to recognition of the North, promises not to target the North with nuclear weapons, and a package of assistance or even buyouts of missiles.³⁴ Yet even William Perry’s calls for “deep talks” with the North to avoid the military option were barely audible.³⁵ With Democratic presidential candidates shunning the issue, Bush found little second-guessing of his handling of North Korea at home. A semblance of control, however, did not obscure concern among attentive observers that miscalculations could occur.

To many, Beijing was left as the pivotal third party, needed by Washington in order to avoid a military solution and by Seoul, Tokyo, and Moscow as they anxiously looked for a compromise on the sidelines. The United States, however, sought to play up support from others in Northeast Asia before seeking China’s help. As Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz insisted, “On North Korea, the key is confronting them with a unified force from Russia, Japan, South Korea, and to a lesser extent China.”³⁶ The Hu-Bush meeting on the sidelines of the G-8 summit did not yet reveal how far the United States would go to meet China’s regional interests, or the degree to which China would address U.S. global interests. If the two could agree on a package, the North would know that economic sanctions would intensify and, failing those, military action could follow.

In times of military tension, the United States continues to have the upper hand over China in Northeast Asia. The South Koreans and the Japanese may want China to press the North hard, but they give preference to ties with the United States, whose power deters North Korea. This may not tell us much about the long-term competition ahead between Washington and Beijing for influence in Northeast Asia. U.S. tactics since 2001 are not popular in Northeast Asia, and, so far, nothing China has done reduces its prospects for renewed centrality in Northeast Asia once the crisis is resolved.

After a series of summit meetings, the United States began economic interdiction with the expectation that the squeeze on the North’s economy

would intensify. In June and July the United States and Japan acted in consort to begin inspections of the North's ships, South Korea acquiesced despite warnings that such actions could provoke the North and fail to offer it a face-saving outcome,³⁷ China activated its diplomacy in order to restart talks, and Russia waited until North Korea decided it should be part of multilateral talks. Pyongyang is not likely to suffer the new blows to its economy long before choosing to change its posture by either compromise in six-party talks or drastic action to force a split among those pressuring it.

Offered little opportunity by the North's extreme rhetoric, its four neighbors began to make progress coordinating their approach on the nuclear issue. As long as they held out hope that the United States would return to the negotiating table, they put aside fears that a military confrontation was drawing closer. In the process, efforts toward regionalism were also put on hold. Despite the mismatch between a strident Pyongyang and an unflustered Washington, both of which had reason to obscure the true nature of the situation, the August 27–29 talks in Beijing left only vague hope for finding common ground at the next round of talks, but no lessening of the severity of the conflict.

If North Korea endures as a nuclear weapons state, it may heighten Northeast Asia's dependence on the United States. Japan and South Korea have already demonstrated that their response is to turn to Washington. If through pressure and negotiations the North abandons its nuclear capability, however, there may be a boost to regionalism. South Korea's place at the center of Northeast Asia would be enhanced by both its leading role in the reintegration of the Korean Peninsula and its balancing role between Japan and China. As Washington responds to the North's threat with plans to relocate military bases and establish a regional intelligence headquarters at Misawa in northeast Japan, it envisions a dominant security role for itself. Once this danger passes, however, the countries of Northeast Asia may calculate that the U.S. aim is to solidify its position as a brake to a separate regional arrangement independent of the United States. The enhanced coordination witnessed in the spring of 2003 is but a prelude to the application of economic pressure while seeking a path to negotiations. This next stage could lead in turn to a decisive phase of crisis resolution. Only this will reveal the balance between U.S. predominance and emerging regionalism. Ironically, the multilateralism that the United States professes to manage the nuclear crisis may, in fact, boost regionalism in which U.S. unilateral tendencies leave it with a more peripheral, if still important, role.

Endnotes

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