

Developments on the North Korean Nuclear Axis: Parallels with Iran?

Ephraim Asculai and Emily B. Landau

Since the early 1990s, the development of a military nuclear program in North Korea has aroused anxiety in the international community in general and in the Far East in particular. The news in early February 2007 that another agreement was reached on the possible termination of this program spurred much optimism, though mitigated by the reality that as in the past, the ultimate success of this agreement is far from certain.

The North Korean nuclear case has had its ups and downs since the early 1990s, but it reached its most serious point in the early morning hours of October 9, 2006, when North Korea carried out an underground nuclear explosion. This was the culmination of both a long technical endeavor on the part of North Korea and the failure of the international efforts to persuade this state to abandon its military nuclear ambitions. The explosion sent shockwaves around the world, stronger than any physical signals that emanated from the underground cavity where the test took place. This was the first time that a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) withdrew from the treaty and then went on to develop and test a nuclear weapon. This was a dangerous precedent, one that warranted a strong response.

The crisis generated some new momentum to persuade North Korea to reverse course. It began with a UN resolution on sanctions in October, and ended with the February development on an agreement reached between the US (and four other parties) and North Korea whereby in return for economic and energy-related benefits, North Korea would begin to dismantle its nuclear program. It remains to be seen whether this newest agreement will hold, yet beyond the case of North Korea itself is the question of potential implications for the nuclear dynamic that is playing out in parallel with respect to Iran and possible emergent lessons for dealing with nuclear proliferators in general.

Members of the
INSS research staff.
Emily Landau is
director of the INSS
Arms Control and
Regional Security
Program.

How We Got There

The 38th parallel – an armistice line from the 1950s – divides the Korean peninsula into the democratic Republic of Korea (ROK) or South Korea, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), or the dictatorship of North Korea. Relations between the US and North Korea, tense throughout the years, worsened considerably in the early 1990s when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) discovered accidentally that the DPRK had lied about its nuclear activities. This also heightened tensions between North and South Korea. An agreement between the US and North Korea over the nuclear issue was reached in 1994, but by 2002, when President Bush dubbed the DPRK, together with Iraq and Iran, as part of an "axis of evil," tensions between the two states were again on the rise.

Not all is known about the North Korean nuclear project. Although a uranium-enrichment project is suspected, the evidence for this is meager; the one proven path for the acquisition of fissile materials – the stuff a nuclear bomb is made of – is the plutonium one. This method necessitates a nuclear reactor where the plutonium is produced, and a reprocessing plant where the plutonium is separated from the uranium. North Korea bought a small research reactor, not very useful for plutonium production, from the Soviet Union in the 1960s. However, it was not until the 1980s that US intelligence discovered the construction

of a small nuclear power plant in Yongbyon, of a type most suitable for the production of plutonium. In 1989, the US discovered the construction of a reprocessing plant near the power reactor.

Although North Korea joined the NPT in 1985, it procrastinated in concluding the mandatory safeguards agreement with the IAEA, and the first inspections were carried out only in 1992. In 1993, when analyzing samples taken at the Yongbyon site, the IAEA discovered that North Korea had provided false information in its declarations to the IAEA, and that it had, in fact, separated more plutonium than it had admitted.

This was the start of the deterioration of the relationship between North Korea and the IAEA, but it was also the start of a political process that culminated in the "Agreed Framework" between the US and North Korea in 1994. This agreement specified the provision of two nuclear power plants to North Korea, in return for the suspension of the North Korean military nuclear program and a reversal of North Korea's intention to withdraw from the NPT. It also provided for the supply of fuel oil to North Korea until the first power reactor came online. In 1995, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) was established for the implementation of the Agreed Framework. However, the latter half of the 1990s was again marked by crisis situations, due mainly to the missile de-

velopment and testing program of North Korea that was and still is the second major area of contention between the US and North Korea. Nonetheless, some spirit of optimism persisted during the remaining years of President Clinton's administration.

A turn for the worse came with President Bush's "axis of evil" State of the Union address in January 2002, and the following October it was reported that North Korea admitted to having violated the terms of KEDO. North Korea then went on to hint at nuclear weapons capability. This was followed by KEDO announcing the cessation of the oil supply to North Korea and the effective termination of its operation.

In early 2003 North Korea withdrew from the NPT, and in August 2003 a new phase began in the attempt to reach a solution to North Korea's nuclear ambitions and the impasse in US-DPRK relations: the "six party talks" were launched in Beijing. The six parties were the US, the DPRK, the ROK, Russia, China, and Japan. Reportedly, the main points on the table were:

- Security guarantees, i.e., that the US would not try to overthrow the present DPRK regime
- "Verifiable" and "irreversible" disarmament of the military nuclear program in the DPRK, including the return of the DPRK to the NPT and the IAEA safeguards regime
- Construction of light water reactors, thereby implementing the

Agreed Framework of 1994

- Diplomatic relations: normalization of relations between the DPRK and the US

- Financial restrictions / trade normalization, including the lifting of sanctions

Not much progress was made in these talks during the first two years. In September 2005 there seemed to be a significant breakthrough when it was reported that an agreement was reached, according to which North Korea would dismantle its program and return to the NPT, and the Korean peninsula would be rid of nuclear weapons. Yet the reports were not borne out, and the following month North Korea accused the US of disrupting the deal by taking steps to obstruct what the US viewed as illicit North Korean financial transactions (these financial sanctions took the form of the US barring financial transactions with a Macao-based bank that North Korea used as a hub for these activities). The talks were discontinued in late 2005 after five rounds; in early July 2006 North Korea carried out missile tests, and then in October came the nuclear explosion.

The immediate reaction of the international community was the adoption of a sanctions resolution in the UNSC (Resolution 1718). This was the first time that the Security Council took any notice of the nuclear situation in the Korean Peninsula – hardly a commendable record, to say the least. On October 31, 2006, North Korea expressed its

willingness to renew the six party negotiations, and on December 18 the sixth round of talks was initiated. However, on December 22, these talks came to an end without a glimmer of an agreement.

A critical turning point seems to have come in January 2007, in a bilateral US-North Korean meeting held in Berlin. Following this meeting, there were new hopes for a breakthrough, and a fresh round of six party talks was scheduled for early February. These negotiations began with high hopes, subsequently suffered some setbacks, but eventually ended in an agreement that provides North Korea with massive fuel oil and aid in return for beginning the process of dismantling its nuclear program.

North Korea's Motivation in the Nuclear Realm

Driving North Korea's nuclear ambitions were its sense of isolation and threat in its regional setting. Its only friend is China, and even this friendship is not a solid one. Although the relationship between North and South Korea has improved, with the former receiving material aid from the latter, there are hardly calm or cordial sentiments between them, not least because of a strong presence of US armed forces on the mainland and the seas. Japan is politically hostile to the DPRK and the relationship with Russia is not the best. The now dormant issues of National and Theater Missile Defenses are seen as an additional

threat by North Korea, since they reduce the deterrent power of the North Korean missile capabilities.

The survival of the present regime is a prime consideration in the security policy of North Korea. The regime feels threatened not only externally but internally as well. It is an impoverished, hunger-stricken nation with little consideration for human rights and a ruling class that gives scant attention to the oppressed working classes. Against this background – and as seen in the cases of Pakistan and Iran, for example – a successful military nuclear project is a source of national pride, and hence of enhanced support for the government. In the external political area the regime is characterized by frequent and extreme changes in attitudes. In the challenge of the present situation, the regime at times seems to be crying for help and at other times displays a belligerence that projects the sense that nothing would cause it to budge from its military ambitions.

Of all the challenges to its security, the perceived threat from the US seems to head North Korea's list. As a function of this perceived threat, a prominent feature of the North Korean case is that it is very much influenced by a bilateral US-North Korean dynamic, at least as far as North Korea is concerned. North Korea directs its attention primarily to the US and has repeatedly asked the latter for security guarantees and economic assistance. Agreeing to the six party talks was a conces-

sion on North Korea's part – its major goal has consistently been to engage the US directly in a bilateral framework. As such, progress on the road to confronting North Korea's nuclear ambitions would necessitate continued emphasis on this dyad, with attention given to regional realities as well.

What is the real impact of the nuclear test and the ensuing political developments as far as international efforts to control nuclear proliferation? In dealing with North Korea, the reality is that the dynamic in this case seems to have brought both sides closer to achieving their aims. Following the test a decision was made on sanctions, which had the effect of bringing North Korea back to the negotiating table and for the first time dealing directly with the US. The result: an initial agreement has been reached.

Nonetheless, questions remain. Given the deep mutual distrust between the US and North Korea, will the agreement be implemented? Given the loopholes in the known contents of the agreement, will they be satisfactorily sealed? Could the negotiations have occurred without the North Korean nuclear explosion, or for that matter, without the sanctions? Built on the turbulent history of North Korean actions and agreements, the longevity and ultimate success of the February agreement are far from assured.

Parallels with Iran?

One of the questions that arose al-

most immediately following the North Korean test was what the implications of this escalation would be for the situation in Iran. Since developments in both of these states have been unfolding in parallel, many analysts were quick to draw conclusions in this regard. One of the most commonly noted conclusions was that if North Korea's nuclear test were to go unpunished, this would

Conclusions that draw simplistic parallels between the North Korean and Iranian cases ignore some of the more sobering realities of Iran's own nuclear ambitions.

send a clear message to Iran that it could easily follow suit. In fact, it was also generally assumed that the nuclear test would surely serve as an important wake-up call for the international community, impressing upon it the need to take more determined action vis-à-vis Iran before it reached the stage of North Korea.

Yet it is not clear to what degree these conclusions either reflect or contribute to a real understanding of the acute proliferation challenges in either case. While the North Korean test clearly heightened concerns significantly, it was the culmination of the specific actions taken by North Korea in pursuit of nuclear weapons, and its desire to "force" the US to negotiate directly. Iran's quest for nuclear weapons is driven by more than its threat perception vis-à-vis its neighbors, the considerable US military presence in the region, and its need for regime survival. In the case

of Iran, there is an additional important factor: its desire to become a regional (if not a world) power, to prove technological competence, progress, and development, and to stand up to the West.

As such, conclusions that draw simplistic parallels between the North Korean and Iranian cases ignore some of the more sobering realities of Iran's own nuclear ambi-

tions – for example, that for Iran, the focus is not bilateral relations with the US, but rather Iran's desire to become a dominant power – and the particular record of international efforts to confront these ambitions. In so doing, these kinds of conclusions present a potentially dangerous illusion that one only needs to recognize the severity of one state's nuclear ambitions, and the international community will suddenly be better equipped to deal with another. Unfortunately, the challenge of Iran (and North Korea) is not that the severity of its nuclear aspirations has not been recognized.

To test the idea that if harsh steps were not taken against North Korea Iran would conclude that it can also act with impunity, it must be asked whether Iran in fact needed the North Korean example to come to this conclusion. Moreover, today – after sanctions and then four months later agreement on a deal

that undercuts the effectiveness of sanctions – it is not clear how the steps taken with regard to North Korea should be judged: as harsh or conciliatory.

Iran's own experience at least over the past year has been that its actions that indicate increased levels of defiance have not elicited very harsh measures. This has been the case even though these measures were repeatedly threatened by the international community. In fact, Iran has learned that the international community is seriously divided in its approach to potential prolif-

given to Iran last summer. Moreover, the sanctions decided upon were watered down and relatively weak, reflecting more the need to bridge differences of opinion among the five permanent members of the Security Council than any new sense of urgency due to the North Korean test. At the same time, the Security Council decision revealed an interesting connection between the two cases: the resolution on sanctions against Iran – as weak as they may be – made it clear to Iran that the Security Council was treating it like North Korea. Some high-level fig-

and Iranian cases turns on the effectiveness of sanctions: how effective they were in the North Korean case, and what effect would they have on Iran. Again, there are major differences between the motivations of both nations for acquiring a military nuclear capability. Those of Iran are far more ambitious, and therefore it may be prepared to suffer much more for its cause. The pain that sanctions would have to inflict on Iran would have to be much more serious for Iran to even consider abandoning its nuclear program, nor is it even certain if any amount of pain would achieve this aim. However, not to attempt this route would be a grave and very costly mistake.

There is one concrete and dangerous connection between the two cases that could be exacerbated by the test: this concerns the direct cooperation that is reported to have taken place between North Korea and Iran in the nuclear realm on sharing technology, and the fact that North Korea has supplied Iran with long range missile technology and components. The military cooperation between these two states has been ongoing, but the test has directed more focused attention to this dangerous link, especially in light of reports that Iranian observers were present at the North Korean test and more recent reports that North Korea is sharing its findings from the explosion with Iran.

An additional source of concern is the implications for the NPT regime


There is no doubt that for a change in nuclear ambitions to occur, something has to change in the basic calculation made within the state itself – but how to induce such change in each case remains an elusive goal.

erators, and that its hesitation is not tied to any doubts that it has about Iran's intentions, but rather to other interests (mainly economic, but also possibly the fear of terrorist retaliation) that impact on the equation. All the efforts and approaches that have surfaced in the negotiations with Iran have not been affected by the North Korean test, and there is thus little reason to believe that this test would be the wake-up call that forces the international community into more determined action.

Indeed, UNSC resolution 1737, adopted unanimously on December 23 and the latest on sanctions against Iran, was not the result of any wake-up call, but rather a much delayed response to the ultimatum that was

ures in Iran, and most recently Supreme Leader Khamenei, are now attributing this negative development to Ahmadinejad's aggressive approach. Iran does not view itself in the same camp as North Korea as far as its standing in the international community, and as such, the very fact that sanctions were decided upon has had an impact. This also lends support to the assessment that although withdrawal from the NPT would give Iran a freer hand in advancing its nuclear program (as was the case for North Korea), Iran is not likely to do so because of the importance that it attributes to its international standing and image.

An important question when discussing both the North Korean



itself, which is further weakened by this test. The regime, however, has suffered a series of setbacks over the past half decade due to a number of developments. Therefore, while the test is a significant and serious step, it does not constitute a shock to a healthy regime, but rather one more negative development in a series of challenges.

Conclusion

What emerges from recent events is that the nuclear test carried out by North Korea is not likely to be a model for dealing either with Iran or with North Korea itself. In both cases, the dynamics are determined not by the specific and escalating steps taken by the proliferators but

by the strategies of confrontation that are attempted, and the ensuing dynamics of engagement between the international community and the proliferators themselves.

The particular steps that each takes in this direction – including a nuclear test – while highly alarming, actually have little to do with the ability of others to convince them to reverse course. The problems that the international community faces in this regard stem from the difficulty of persuading a determined proliferator to step back from the nuclear brink, especially after it has made significant advances in this direction. While there are a few cases of nuclear rollback (for ex-

ample, South Africa and Libya), it is not clear whether any more general lessons can be gleaned from these experiences that apply to other proliferation challenges. There is no doubt that for a change in nuclear ambitions to occur, something has to change in the basic calculation made within the state itself – but how to induce such change in each case remains an elusive goal. In the dire situation of North Korea, it was demonstrated that a strong stick, coupled with a willingness on the side of the US to enter bilateral negotiations with a degree of magnanimity, apparently did the trick. If the North Korean case ultimately proves successful, the prize will be enormous.