North Korean Nuclear Politics at the Crossroads

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Abstract

North Korea, through its nuclear endgame involving, agile intermingling of brinkmanship, and appeasement, has successfully chased three rabbits simultaneously: extracting quid pro quos through negotiation; achieving “nuclear deterrence capability” by transgressing agreements; and subjugating South Korea ideologically and strategically. While harvesting economic returns and prestige through negotiations, the nation has muddled through to the point that it can show the “plutonium bombs-in-the-basement” any time and produce highly enriched uranium soon. The North’s call for “inter-Korean brotherly collaboration” delicately combined with nuclear blackmail has divided South Korean society and estranged the ROK-U.S. alliance. However, the game has entered a sudden-death playoff as the North’s internal paradoxes as well as the international pressure will not tolerate it any longer. Soon Pyongyang will have to make a strategic choice among Pakistani, Israeli, Libyan, and Ukrainian models. While Pyongyang may regard the first two choices as too risky and the third one as too insulting, the Ukrainian experience under the Nunn-Lugar Program is a safe, prudent way for North Korea to get out of the dangerous nuclear acrobatics. Becoming a government for its own people, not vice-versa, would be a good starting point.
Dangerous Tiger-Back Riding

North Korea’s nuclear politics, based on “strategic ambiguity,” is so skillful it engenders envy and admiration as well as resentment. So far North Korea, through its nuclear gambit, has successfully chased three rabbits: extracting *quid pro quo* through negotiation in the hope of keeping its drowning economy afloat, achieving “nuclear deterrence capability” by transgressing agreements, and subjugating South Korea both ideologically and strategically. The nuclear game, however, seems to have entered a tense sudden-death playoff. Not before long the Pyongyang regime will have to make a strategic choice among the Pakistani, Israeli, Libyan, and Ukrainian models, before the United States considers cloning its Iraqi solution. South Korea’s appeasement policy toward the North will be standing on the crossroads, too. The moral basis upholding the “policy of peace and prosperity” can quickly collapse if a nuclear-wielding North Korea becomes more prominent.

For North Korea, the endgame has several alternatives: become a nuclear weapon state with a nuclear test or with a formal declaration of bomb possession; become a *de facto* nuclear weapon state without mushroom clouds; capitulate to international pressure and enslave itself to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT); or negotiate a nuclear solution in both bilateral and multilateral settings. Pyongyang may find the first two options too risky and the third one too humiliating, though the international community will welcome it as a silver bullet for all of its proliferation problems. Probably, the fourth one is a reasonable choice. What is important is that domestic and external variables will not allow North Korea to continue on a tightrope seemingly leading to the Pakistani or the Israeli model. The stratagem is bound to encounter a dead end soon, though it has paid off handsomely so far.

The North’s nuclear game, or “policy of strategic ambiguity,” is an agile intermingling of brinkmanship diplomacy and back steps. It is akin to tiger-back riding in that the rider hesitates to get off lest he be devoured, or monocycle riding in that a cyclist must fall down to stop. For a long time, Pyongyang leaders may have regarded their tiger riding as the only recourse for their frail monolithic system. But, now the dilemma is whether they can afford to entertain democratic reforms and relinquish the “nuclear deterrent,” which would result in a gradual demise of their regime, or risk grave consequences of U.S.-led encirclement by maintaining nuclear blandishment that could accelerate termination of the regime.

So far, the tiger-back riding has been a lucrative approach. Externally, it has taken Seoul and Tokyo hostage to fend off any possibility of U.S. military intervention. Simultaneously, it has been a powerful negotiating tool, harvesting economic and political returns. Under the 1994 Agreed Framework the United States provided the communist country with 500,000 tons of heavy oil per year until supplies stopped in 2002 over the North’s uranium enrichment program. South Korea and Japan spent over $1.5 billion on the construction of two light water reactors in North Korea until the Korean peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) decided to suspend the construction work on December 1, 2003. Political returns have been no less enormous. The nuclear gambit has made it possible for the backward nation to dominate international nuclear politics for 15 years, equalizing itself with the only superpower. Internally, the tiger-back riding has brought about the “nuclear deterrent,” a symbol of prestige the Pyongyang regime critically needs to govern its people.

However, the North Korean nuclear game is approaching its penultimate stage regardless of Pyongyang’s wishes. Externally, the Bush administration refuses to be blackmailed any more and promises firmer action like the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) to stifle the North. Internally, how much longer the Pyongyang regime can maintain a morally corrupt and economically impoverished system remains to be seen. Though the regime has enjoyed a lot of benefits from three nuclear crises, it cannot afford to ignite another one with impunity. It also is doubtful how many more years South Koreans will trouble themselves to help an ungrateful Pyongyang, keeping their eyes closed both to the nuclear peril and human rights abuses in the North.

By putting all the pieces of the puzzle together, it seems rather obvious that continued tiger-back riding can only lead the Pyongyang...
regime to its own sudden and tragic demise—not to a nuclear status similar to Pakistani or Israel. The survival of the regime will become solely dependent on awakened leaders who finally address quality of life and adapt measures to banish the North’s grinding poverty.

**Plutonium Bombs in the Basement**

North Korea’s so-called “nuclear deterrent” is composed of three parts: pre-1992 plutonium which was produced before an IAEA ad hoc inspection in the spring of 1992; post-2002 plutonium extracted after a nuclear freeze was lifted in the wake of the third nuclear crisis and its potential to produce additional plutonium; and lastly, highly enriched uranium (HEU) that it now is attempting to produce secretly. Regarding the pre-1992 plutonium, it seems absurd to believe that it exists as plutonium-in-the-basement. There are plenty of reasons to believe that it exists as “bombs-in-the-basement.” As long as Pyongyang does not show the bombs, outsiders have to rely on an analysis of the known conditions, such as the will and motives of the leadership, weapon-proneness of nuclear facilities, nuclear material, bomb technology, delivery vehicles, etc.2

The North’s embrace of WMDs can be discerned from its character and calculated moves. Under the strong will of Pyongyang’s leadership, the Stalinist nation must have purchased and operated as early as in the 1960s the then state-of-the-art IRT-2000 criticality reactor and designed a 9 million square meter nuclear research complex in Yongbyon. The complex encompasses the Nuclear Physics Institute, Radiochemical Laboratory, Radioactive Isotopes Laboratory, Nuclear Electronic Institute, three sub critical reactors, betatron, linear accelerator, and many other facilities. The construction of the cyclotron and completion of X-ray and cobalt irradiation facilities soon followed. Even Pyongyang’s economic plight during the 1980s and 1990s did not stop the energetic development of the “nuclear deterrent” and ballistic missiles. The North may have reconfirmed its nuclear path when China and Russia rushed to Seoul to establish formal relations with South Korea. For the North Korean leaders, nuclear weapons would constitute a multi-purpose tool for survival: a means to cure their insecurity complex, a negotiating lever vis-a-vis the United States, a source of hard currency, a symbol of prestige for internal control, and no less importantly, effective weapons to ensure strategic and ideological superiority over economically powerful South Korea.

Highly nuclear weapon-prone facilities were already in operation or near completion by the early 1990s. North Korea’s nuclear facilities include uranium mines, refineries, fuel fabrication facilities, reprocessing plants, and graphite-moderated and gas-cooled reactors capable of making weapon-grade plutonium through short-term low-level irradiation operation.3 Today, no country uses such a type of reactor for electricity production. North Korea began research on uranium refining, converting, and fuel fabrication in the 1970s. To this end it established an Isotope Production Laboratory (IPL) for chemical research in 1976. A 5 MW reactor was fully activated in 1986. Uranium refineries and conversion facilities in the Bakchon Research Center were in operation in 1982, and construction on similar facilities in Pyongsan began in 1985 followed by groundbreaking for the construction of a 50 MW reactor in Yongbyon.

Nuclear weapon technologies and know-how are often determined by the length of time invested and the number of scientists at work. Given that only three years were spent on the Manhattan Project some 60 years ago, it may be safe to say that North Korea with more than 40 years of weapons development and with participation of numerous experts has long attained the necessary weapon technologies.


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3 For this reason, the United States promised via the Agreed Framework to replace these reactors with more proliferation-resistant light water reactors.
Inseok Han, and some others. Once called “the father of North Korean bomb,” Seungki Lee was dean of the engineering college at Seoul National University until he was abducted to the North during the Korean War. Later, he served as the first director of the Yongbyon complex and as a major general in the Peoples’ Army, leading the North’s nuclear and conventional weapons development until he died in 1996. Sangrok Do, a professor at Seoul National and Kim Il-song universities in the 1940s, was a pioneer in the development of accelerator and other atomic energy-related research works. Inseok Han, the best nuclear theorist in North Korea, studied in Japan, Germany and Russia and also had professorships at Seoul National and Kim-Il-song Universities more than 50 years ago. North Korea is proud of many others, too: Keun Chung, once a professor at Seoul National University and later an authoritative reactor expert in North Korea, Hakkeun Choi, administrative specialist dealing with the IAEA and other external affairs, Youngsoo Kye, the architect of the nuclear research complexes in Yongbyon, Bakchon and Taechon, and Wonha Kyung, a former researcher at the Los Alamos National Laboratory and a professor at McGill University in Canada, also known as the person who completed implosive, high explosive, and detonator experiments.

Delivery vehicles are essential to the practical use of nuclear warheads. In this regard, the North is in the nuclear club. In the 1980s, North Korea imported Scud-B missiles from Egypt, and produced them domestically through replication. In the late 1980s, it developed Scud-C missiles with a 600-kilometer range and deployed them in Shingye, right above the demilitarized zone. In May 1993, it successfully test fired the Nodong missile, which had a range of 1,300 kms. That was followed by the 1998 test-firing of the Taepodong missile with a range of 1,700-2,100 kms. Also the North is being suspected as developing more powerful IRBMs with a range of 2,500-4,000 kms, approaching the possession of ICBM capability.

Undoubtedly, North Korea has long achieved juche (self-reliance) in the full nuclear cycle for plutonium bomb production. Given its long history of nuclear investment, its substantial pool of scientists, its 40 high-explosive tests since the 1980s, its achievements in missile development, combined with the leaders’ ambition toward the status of a nuclear weapon state, one has no reason not to assume that the nation has long acquired technologies and know-how necessary for manufacturing nuclear bombs. One can safely assume that the North has done its utmost to possess the “nuclear deterrent.” It seems unreasonable to assume that the North has not achieved what the United States did six decades ago.

Consequently, a few interim conclusions become inescapable. It is logical to assume the existence of the “past bombs” which are commonly referred to as 1-3 plutonium bombs North Korea produced before 1992. North Korea must have mined and refined the uranium ore, produced and burned fuel rods in the 5 MW reactor, and reprocessed the spent fuel at the Radioactive Chemical Laboratory. It is plausible that North Korea turned the “plutonium-in-the-basement” into the “plutonium bombs-in-the-basement.” Whether these bombs are what Abdul Qadeer Khan saw in 1999 is not for certain; but the uncertainty does

5 Probably, the tests were for completion of high explosive, implosive and detonator/fuse experiments. On July 9, 2004, Director Youngku Koh of the National Intelligence Service testified in the National Assembly that North Korea tested some 70 explosive experiments between 1997 and September 2003. The North is known as having conducted some 70 experiments before 1992.

6 The “Radioactive Chemical Laboratory” is composed of hot cells, pulsed columns, mixed settlers, glove boxes, ventilation chimneys, waste storages, steam heaters, etc. and would become the de facto “super inspection on the two unreported facilities and the North’s refusal. This was how the first nuclear crisis began.

On July 7, 2004, Defense Minister Youngkil Cho testified in the National Assembly that North Korea was developing and deploying a new missile. In August 2004, the Defense Weekly (August 2004) reported that the North was developing land-based and sea-launched IRBMs.
not negate existence of the North Korean bombs. In South Korea, optimistic reformists argue that one should not talk about nuclear weapons until they are visually confirmed, but it is indefensible for a state to stand by waiting for irrefutable proof when the evidence otherwise is so compelling. Above all, it is North Korea, not the global community that has to provide nuclear transparency if it is really clean. As long as North Korea decides to hide the bombs and rejects IAEA inspection, the outside world is unable to demonstrate the existence of any smoking guns. Accordingly, it is also reasonable to presume that Pyongyang is agonizing over if and when it should pass the “political threshold.” Of course, a nuclear test or a declaration of nuclear weapon statehood by the supreme ruler would be the most emphatic announcement. So far North Korea has deferred any decision, constrained by its scrupulous calculation of profit and loss.

With its undeclared bombs, North Korea has fully enjoyed the game of which timely brinkmanship diplomacy and compromise is an integral part. On May 29, 1993, at the peak of the first nuclear crisis, the Pyongyang regime test-fired a Nodong missile, shocking many North Korea-watchers. On June 11, 1993, the day before its NPT withdrawal announcement of March 12 became effective, the North dramatically compromised with the United States to “suspend withdrawal from the NPT.” Its controversial test-firing of a Taepodong missile on August 31, 1998, amid mounting U.S.-DPRK tension over the Gu’mchang-ni tunnels, helped another dramatic compromise: 600,000 tons of U.S. food in order to put inspectors inside the tunnels.

Intermittent and blatant blackmail is also an indispensable element in the game, while the uncertainties revolving around the undeclared bombs validate these tactics: “We are to have nuclear weapons to deal with American nuclear blackmail”; “We have the bombs”; “We can demonstrate our nuclear capability through nuclear tests”; “We see

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8 Remark by North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Oct. 25, 2002, or right after emergence of new controversies over the North’s HEU program.
9 Remark by Geun Lee, the North Korean chief delegate at the U.S.-China-DPRK tripartite talks in Beijing on April 23–24, 2003.
10 Remark by the North Korean delegates at the first Six-Party Talks held in Beijing on Aug. 27–29, 2003.

no purpose in continuing nuclear talks and have no choice but to strengthen our nuclear deterrent;”11; “U.S. tough measures will be responded by our tougher ones.”12 Of course, the frequent “weapon possession” remarks by the North Korean officials since 2003, reflective of the North’s insecurity after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, fall short of passing the political threshold. Witnessing the U.S. precision strike capability and advanced military operations such as, “Target of Opportunity,” “Shock and Awe,” “Leapfrogging,” etc., the North Korean leadership may have been terrified by the possibility of becoming the “next target” of the American war on terrorism. The demolition of Saddam Hussein’s reign in Iraq must have spurred Pyongyang’s “nuclear deterrent” declaration. In a nutshell, through strategic ambiguity, Pyongyang has realized substantial economic and political return, a striking example of which was the 1994 Agreed Framework.

Toward Seoul, the North’s nuclear blackmail has been delicately blended with a call for “inter-Korean brotherly collaboration: “Brothers in both Koreas should unite to exclude foreign powers”; “No matter how cold outside weather may be, everything will be fine if we two Koreas shake hands.”14 Such a peace offensive has sometimes been bolstered with North Korean mass media pronouncements: “Our nuclear weapons will protect the brothers in the South from American confrontation.” Of course, The North never forgot to blackmail: “If another war breaks out, Seoul will be turned into a sea of fire”; “If something

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11 Remark by Tae-yang Chung, North Korea’s chief delegate to the Six-Party Talks on Aug. 30, 2003, right after the conclusion of the first round Talks.
12 2004 New Year Address.
15 Remark by the North Korean delegate Park Young-soo at working-level meeting for exchange of special envoys in Panmunjom on March 19, 1993. This was followed by another blackmail on the next day by the North’s government-run television network, “If a war breaks out, Japan will not be safe, either.”
goes wrong, the South will suffer from uncountable disasters; Dark cloud of nuclear war is overshadowing the peninsula. Both Koreas should see the realities and cooperate to break the deadlock.

The North’s game toward South Korea has been a shining success. It has polarized South Korean society into “conservatives” and “reformists,” yielding the “South-South conflict.” It has estranged the Seoul-Washington alliance and is now prompting more South Korean students to ask: “Why do we need the alliance and the American troops here?” The North maintains powerful artillery capable of pouring several hundred thousands of shells into Seoul and the proximities of the DMZ. It maintains over 100,000 special operations forces. Forthcoming removal of U.S. self-propelled guns, AH-64 helicopters, and various intelligence assets will deepen the South’s vulnerability to the North’s artillery and special operation forces. The ill-timed estrangement of its U.S. alliance will deepen the South’s hostage status, force Seoul to boost defense spending, and scare foreign investors. But, these security concerns are overwhelmed by the fever toward “peaceful unification” and “brotherly love.” Seoul’s “reformist” NGOs, anti-American activists and not a few students simply continue to call for “withdrawal of the U.S. troops.” Meanwhile, the Seoul government continues to conveniently overlook the inherent dangers of the nuclear crisis and sends trucks laden with food aid, even while the North Korean navy violates the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the West Sea.

Unfinished Plutonium Game

In the wake of the controversies over the North’s HEU program in October 2002, the Pyongyang regime revived its brinkmanship diplomacy, this time with its post-2002 plutonium: lifting of nuclear freeze (December 22, 2002), declaration of operation of the reprocessing facilities (December 27, 2002), announcement of NPT withdrawal (January 10, 2003), operation of the 5 MW reactor (February, 26, 2003), re-opening of the construction work for the 50 MW reactor in Yongbyon (October, 2003), etc. Immediate attention was focused on the 8,010 spent fuel rods, which were extracted from the 5 MW reactor in 1994 and had been sealed and secured according to the 1994 Agreed Framework.

This time again, the North Korean gambit began with blackmail: “We are successfully implementing reprocessing work of the 8,000 spent fuel rods in its final phase.” Clearly, it was brinkmanship diplomacy just a few days before the U.S.-China-DPRK tripartite talks due on April 23-24 in Beijing. Hawks in Washington demanded suspension of the multilateral talks since “reprocessing of the spent fuel rods” meant crossing the “red line” set by the Bush administration. On April 21, the North’s Central News Agency made slight changes in the Foreign Ministry’s statement on its Internet home page: “We are successfully going forward to reprocess work of more than 8,000 spent fuel rods at the final phase,” thus indicating that plutonium extraction has not begun yet. Subsequently, steam evaporation, a strong evidence of the operation, was detected on April 30-May 1, which was followed by American detection in July of crypton-85 in the North Korean atmosphere, another strong indication of work on the spent fuel rods. Then, the North’s government-owned news agencies spewed forth yet more blackmail: “If the United States continues to threaten us with nuclear weapons, we have no other choice but to have a nuclear deterrent.” (June 9, 2003) “Do not test our war deterrence capability.” (July 1, 2003). On July 8, the North Korean Foreign Ministry notified Washington: “We finished the reprocessing work of the 8,000 spent fuel rods as of June 30, 2003.” The blackmailing as a whole was strong enough to project a message that the Pyongyang regime is striving to produce additional plutonium; however, in the absence of clearer evidence, the situation did not kindle the spark needed to ignite a concerted international sanction against it.

For the first 10 days of 2004, Pyongyang stepped up the likelihood of newly-produced plutonium by inviting American civilian specialists

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16 Remark by a North Korean delegate at a working-level meeting for inter-Korean economic cooperation held in Pyongyang on May 20, 2003.
17 Remark by the North Korean chief delegate at the 11th Ministerial-level Conference held in Seoul on July 9, 2003.
18 Remark by the spokesman of the North’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs on April 18, 2003.
to the Yongbyon nuclear facilities. After the invitation, Pyongyang announced: “We showed our nuclear deterrent.”\(^{20}\) This was corroborated by Dr. Siegfried Hecker, who said at a U.S. Senate hearing on January 21 that he had seen what North Korea described as “200 g of plutonium” when he visited Yongbyon.\(^{21}\) Dr. Hecker, a former president of the Los Alamos National Institute, also testified that the 5 MW reactor now in operation could produce 6 kg of plutonium annually. By only allowing the U.S. visitors to see rather than sample or use any inspection instrument, North Korea shrouded the 8,000 spent fuel rods with uncertainties, which could mean 25 to 30 kilograms of plutonium or 3 to 6 plutonium bombs.

Together with what the spent fuel rods signify, the North’s capabilities of producing additional plutonium will emerge as an explosive variable for future nuclear politics. If North Korea completes the 50 MW reactor in Yongbyon and the 200 MW one in Taechon, they will be able to increase the plutonium stockpile even more drastically.

**North Korea’s Estimated Plutonium Production Capability\(^ {22}\)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reactor</th>
<th>5 MW (Yongbyon)</th>
<th>50 MW (Yongbyon)</th>
<th>200 MW (Taechon)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fuel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>ton</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Rods</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8,010</td>
<td>21,600</td>
<td>38,400</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pu Production/year (Assumption: 365 operation days/year)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>amount(kg)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>99</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>94.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Evolving Uranium Game**

The controversies over North Korea’s HEU program surfaced in October 2002 when the United States accused North Korea of violating the 1994 Agreed Framework by setting up a secret enrichment program. However, it was not the first controversy over the HEU. Even before 2002, defector Jangyup Hwang, a former Secretary of International Affairs, and his attendant Dukhong Kim testified through numerous statements and interviews that North Korea had achieved uranium-based bomb technology with Pakistani help. Many other defectors talk about the suspicious function of Gumchang-ni tunnels, “Chonmasan electric station” and many other “underground facilities.”\(^ {23}\) Though there are still many reasons not to believe the defectors’ testimonies as credible, after Khan’s testimony one now has reasons to assume that there are at least small-scale enrichment plants or laboratory-scale enrichment facilities in Yongbyon, Pyongsan, Bakchon, or elsewhere.

Abdul Qadeer Khan, the protagonist of Pakistan’s nuclear weapon development and export of nuclear technologies, testified that the Pakistan-North Korea enrichment deal began in the late 1980s, and shipments began in the late 1990s. He acknowledged that Pakistan sold a centrifuge design and some complete centrifuge units, and provided North Korea with shopping lists of parts and equipments required to construct a full-scale enrichment plant.\(^ {24}\) Khan’s remarks complemented what many experts have speculated. For example, many conservative specialists believe that the Agreed Framework, prohibiting the plutonium production, may have prompted the strong motivation toward uranium enrichment.\(^ {25}\) Others suppose that North Korea must have started enrichment efforts in 1998 when the nation’s Taepodong missile test-firing and the Gumchang-ni incident were causing new tension.\(^ {26}\)

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22 Estimated by Dr. Seungtaek Shin, the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses.
23 According to the revelations of a defector who worked there, the facilities were constructed by engineering units of the Peoples’ Army in 1984, and have been producing nuclear material since 1987. All of the 100 management personnel are composed of military officers in plain clothes over 40 years of age while the 400 workers are life-sentenced political prisoners.
26 Leon V. Sigal sees April 1998 as the date when North Korea decided to push
Experts believe that centrifuge technology is the North’s choice since it wants to utilize Pakistan’s know-how and experience while laser technology is too complicated and gas-dispersion technology requires easily detectable facilities. They also believe that Pakistan, amid vehement nuclear competition with India, wanted North Korea’s missile technology. This is how the possibility of the enrichment-missile deal has become a persuasive speculation among the experts. This speculation is supported by abundant circumstantial evidence: Khan’s frequent visits to North Korea during the 1990s, North Korean importation of maraged aluminum and other enrichment-related material, technological similarity between the North’s Nodong missiles and Pakistan’s Ghauri missiles, the possibility of North Korean involvement in an international nuclear black market, etc.

Given the circumstantial evidence, Khan’s testimony, and other information from confidential sources, this author assumes as follows. First, leakage of Pakistan’s enrichment technology to North Korea must have been led by the Khan Research Laboratory (KRL) and its overseas branches. Second, considering the 1994 Agreed Framework and Pakistan’s successful test-firing of a Ghauri missile in 1998, the enrichment-missile deal must have begun in the mid 1990s. Third, what Pakistan has provided to North Korea may include scores of P-1 and P-2 type centrifuges, 50 kg of UF6 for calibration standard, blueprints and technologies for construction of enrichment stages and cascades, etc. Fourth, given the relatively short history of the enrichment activities and the difficulties of construction and operation of secret enrichment facilities, the North probably has not acquired any full-scale enrichment facilities, nor weapon-grade HEU yet. However, one should not


27 Pakistan test-fired Ghauri-I in April 1998 and Ghauri-II in April 1999, the year Khan said he saw “nuclear devices” in North Korea.

28 North Korea may have joined an international nuclear black market, selling two tons of uranium hexafluoride to Libya in the early 2001. If confirmed, it would be the first known case in which the North Korean government has sold a key ingredient for manufacturing atomic weapons to another country and an indication of the North’s interests in exchanging uranium bomb technology. See: New York Times, May 23 and 25, 2004.

rule out possibilities of the North operating laboratory-scale centrifuge facilities at present. Finally, given the North’s endeavors and the history of clandestine deals with Pakistan, the HEU issue will become sooner or later another powerful leverage North Korea can play the “strategic ambiguity game.” It would mean a new arrow in the North Korean quiver.

At the third round of the Six Party Talks held in Beijing on June 23-26, North Korea revealed once again its unchanged pursuit of multiple objectives. North Korean delegates humbly stated: “We do not want to make any more nuclear bombs,” “We have to persuade the military which wants a nuclear test,” and “We are willing to include reprocessing facilities in the nuclear freeze.” Some reformist analysts in Seoul were naive enough to interpret the remarks as a sign of willingness to step back. Others expected that the United States would call for “complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantling (CVID)” and the North Korean idea of “freeze with compensation” could reach a compromise at the next round of the Six-Party Talks. “We do not want to make more bombs” should be interpreted into “We will keep the bombs we have already produced” and “Reprocessing can be frozen” into “We will keep our enrichment right intact.” The remarks sound like appeasement but they constitute more blackmail reflective of the North’s die-hard ambition for “nuclear deterrence capability.”

Pyongyang at the Crossroads

No matter how lucrative it may have been, there are many indications that the North’s tiger-back riding is approaching its end. First, a continuation of the dangerous nuclear game is likely to precipitate a quick and tumultuous demise of the Pyongyang regime. The international community will not tolerate it or allow North Korea to play toward a Pakistani or Israeli model. An attempt to acquire the status of a nuclear weapon state through a nuclear test or by suspending the nuclear dialogue will not fail to prompt either American military intervention or harsh international sanctions stifling the North’s already morbid economy. The United States, tired of being blackmailed by a “rogue state” and being a victim of broken agreements, will prefer a
quicker prescription rather than engage in an endless, futile dialogue. The prescription may include implementation of the tight Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and other coercive measures, in cooperation with allies. The more tenaciously the North pursues the Pakistani or Israeli path, the more the United States will lean toward the Iraqi example.

In this connection, the “first strike” strategy of the Bush administration, increasingly discernible after the September 11 terrorist attacks, merits attention. The 2002 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) already justifies “first nuclear strikes” in case of certain military contingencies. The NPR specifies “the possession of nuclear weapons by hostile countries” as an example of such contingencies. Pyongyang’s formal declaration of a nuclear possession or a nuclear test may make the communist nation a high priority target for a U.S. nuclear strike. For this and many other reasons, the Israeli or the Pakistani model is hardly a path North Korea can choose without penalty. Presumably, election of Senator John Kerry as the new president would not alleviate the strength of his nation’s non-proliferation and anti-terrorism policy.

A third choice, the Libyan model, a quick and sudden nuclear resolution via Moammar Gadhafi’s unilateral confession and vow to abandon all WMD development after a long stand-off with the United States, may be wishful thinking on the part of the international community, as Pyongyang may regard it as an “insulting route to suicide.” For North Korea, unilateral confession and abandonment of the “nuclear deterrent” would be leaving its own destiny at the mercy of the United States. For the DPRK, opening of its society and acceptance of market economy would be inevitably followed by “capitalistic contamination,” a silent killer of the disreputable systems in the North. There are additional reasons why the North is likely to reject the Libyan model. Unlike Libya, which pursued WMDs as a means to expand its influence over the Islamic world, North Korean leaders have much more desperate motives directly related to their own survival. Libya has achieved almost nothing in the development of WMDs except some in the chemical agent field. In contrast, Pyongyang’s may consider its achievements too great to discard lightly. Unlike Libya, where Westernized pragmatic forces have voices, decision-making in Pyongyang is monopolized by Chairman Kim Jong Il and his military cadres. Above all, a Libyan-style capitulation may be too unpalatable for the North’s leaders who have long enjoyed blackmailing or taking hostage other states.

Still, there are other symptoms heralding a conclusion of the Pyongyang’s nuclear game. So far, it has been conventional wisdom to believe that no matter how disastrous its economy may be, the quality of life problem will not spur an implosion since its people have been kept well-isolated from the world. This wisdom, however, is now beginning to collapse. North Korean people already have started to perceive, though gradually, failure of the juche economy and have sought a better life, if not a sudden denial of their own system. How much longer the regime can survive the exodus of its people will be seen. It is doubtful for the North Koreans to accept for long the notorious “3 Cs (cult, control, and class)” system at the sacrifice of their own quality of life.

Pressure from the neighboring countries is not negligible either. If the current hostage situation is to continue, Japanese rightists would some day demand responses in kind, while even China and Russia, the North’s former allies, now refuse to accept another nuclear weapon.

29 Importantly, by searching the North Korean ferry Mankyungbong 92 at Nikata port in June 2003, Japan showed its strong will to participate in the PSI. Despite the legality controversies, an increasing number of countries like Australia, Russia, Singapore, etc. are participating in the PSI, and North Korea-bound suspicious cargoes are already being interdicted.


31 On Dec. 19, 2003, Libya unilaterally announced that it would discard all WMDs, accommodate the IAEA safeguards, and abide by all international nonproliferation apparatus including the NPT Additional Protocol.

bilateral agreements would be much more agreeable to Pyongyang than the other extreme scenarios. It will not threaten the North's regime, since denuclearization would take place gradually while providing necessary economic assistance to replace the nuclear weapon industry. Surely, the United States and the international community will not demur. They have no reason not to apply the Nunn-Lugar Program to North Korea under the G-8 Global Partnership initiative. If adopted for removal of North Korean WMDs, the Ukrainian model would show a safe way for North Korea to get out of the dangerous nuclear acrobatics, or to get off the tiger’s back safely without fear of being fatally mauled. All the DPRK needs is willingness to improve its notorious political and economic system only gradually to become a government caring about the quality of life of its own people.

Ukrainian model as a Possible Way Out

The North’s choice of the Libyan model would constitute the best outcome from the point of view of the global community. A second best, more feasible, choice may be the Ukrainian model, which would be much more face-saving for North Korea. By accepting the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program that accompanied some US$700 million in assistance, Ukraine has dismantled or returned to Russia 2,000 warheads and destroyed all missile silos since 1993. To this end, the U.S.-Ukraine—Russia Trilateral Agreement and the U.S.-Ukraine Cooperative Threat Reduction Framework Agreement were signed in 1994. Under the agreements, the CTR Program also provided housing for retiring officers and found new civilian jobs for thousands of scientists and workers employed for the production and operation of the nuclear weapons. Now Ukraine plans to permanently shut down the notorious Chernobyl reactor and purchase LWRs to meet the nation’s energy demand, expand its cooperation with NATO and gradually integrate into the Western world. The US$2.2 billion loan from the IMF in 1998 was another catalyst for Ukrainian economic development.

Dismantling of the WMDs in accordance with multilateral and

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33 Since the enactment of the Nunn-Lugar Act in 1991, the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program has provided some $4 billion in economic assistance since 1991 and successfully dismantled or eliminated some 7,000 nuclear warheads, 500 ballistic missiles, 400 submarines or other launching pads, and 200 nuclear test tunnels in Russia and the republics newly independent after the collapse of the USSR.

34 At the G-8 summit held in June 2002 in Canada, the member countries agreed on the “10 plus 10 over 10 plan.” Under it, the United States promised to donate $10 billion while other countries agreed to provide another $10 billion for the next 10 years for geographical expansion of the Nunn-Lugar Program application.
The North’s nuclear gambit has been even more successful toward South Korea and the latter’s relations with the United States. The game has polarized South Korean society and estranged the alliance between the credulous Seoul and vigilant Washington. Now South Korea is helplessly divided into “conservatives” and “reformists.” The strident voices of the reformists, who wait for speedier brotherly reconciliation, obscure the raison d’être of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Whistle blowers are ruthlessly sold out as “flunky Pro-American” or “anachronistic Cold War warriors” by those who believe that “the bombs in the hands of the brothers are not a threat, but will be unified Korea’s proud property.” Now, as anti-American slogans in Seoul evoke escalating anti-Korean sentiments in Washington, the alliance that has provided South Korea with a shield for security and economic prosperity for over a half century is flickering like a candle in the wind.

Nevertheless, the alliance will not be as brittle as it may seem. More importantly, the North’s nuclear game is at last approaching its final crossroads. North Korean leaders can probably feel the weight of international pressure and American resolve. They understand that compensation and non-compliance will not last long, though it may take more time for the young South Koreans to become disillusioned with their nationalistic fervor. If Pyongyang is aware of this, it may be preparing the second phase of its nuclear game: surrendering the “nuclear deterrent” for a “comprehensive guarantee” in which the United States submits, as starters, a non-aggression treaty, economic assistance, political recognition, and a promise not to intervene in domestic affairs.

That would add many more years to the North’s repugnant system, devoid of human rights. It also would allow room to keep and develop other WMDs, like biochemical weapons and missiles useful for a new game of hide and seek and diplomatic duplicity. The 3C system would survive longer. If Pyongyang harbors this scheme, it will be another case of wishful thinking. The United States, whether under re-elected Bush or a Democrat president, being conscious of the spectacular failures of the Agreed Framework, know clearly that it is not the way to deal with the North. Insightful North Korea watchers, whether in Seoul or Washington, know that as long as the North retains its unsavory system it will need the means to threaten neighbors and control its people. They remember that South Africa gave up the bombs only after they had thrown away the apartheid, the system that generated need for nuclear bombs.

In the diplomatic crossfire over ending the nuclear controversy once and for all, Pyongyang’s argument that “the U.S. hostile policy toward North Korea is the culprit” is not tenable since the United States is not hostile to any democratic country that does not spread WMDs or support terrorism. The culprit is the North’s notorious system that generates the need for WMDs. As long as the Pyongyang regime clings to its nefarious system, encompassing all sorts of wrongdoings such as father-to-son power succession, one-party dictatorship, neglect that leads to starvation, isolation from the outside world, human rights abuses, and drug-trafficking—only to mention a few—the regime has ample reason to cherish WMDs. Though a country can melt bombs into shovels, the shovels will be made again into bombs as long as it has motives to do so. This would be the correct conclusion if the U.S. leaders were to debate the need to dismantle the Pyongyang regime.

Here is an important caveat for the North Korean leadership. Becoming a government for its own people, not vice-versa, is the starting point. Gradual economic reforms and democratization slow enough not to prompt an implosion will suffice. Then, all others become easy. They will find WMDs less necessary. They won’t need to export missiles or fight the U.S.-led PSI, since full participation in the international economy will bring them a cascade of dollars. They won’t need to demand the U.S. drop its hostile policy since Washington would do that voluntarily. They won’t need to worry about any U.S. desire for regime change since the Americans will find it unnecessary. Finally, they will no longer need to vilify conservatives in South Korea since they will readily stop opposing economic assistance to the North. The Ukrainian experience under the Nunn-Lugar Program is a benchmarking example. That may be a reasonable way to dismount the tiger. To stay on the tiger any longer is like burning the only bridge to return it to a normal structure, or an unmistakable harbinger of its own doomsday.