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North Korea's Nuclear 'Threat'

A Survey of Recent Articles

In October 1994, building on the free-lance diplomacy of former president Jimmy Carter, the United States struck a deal with communist North Korea, which had seemed on the verge of becoming a nuclear power. Although it blunted the immediate risk of a military confrontation, critics condemned the accord as "appeasement." Under the so-called Agreed Framework, North Korea is to receive two light-water reactors, a free supply of fuel oil while the reactors are being built, and various other inducements, in return for freezing its current nuclear program and eventually permitting "special" (on-demand) international inspections of its nuclear waste sites. The agreement has not proven easy to implement. Pyongyang has repeatedly made new demands and put up new obstacles. But for all the deal's shortcomings, and the further difficulties and dangers ahead, it now appears to some analysts that "appeasement"—up to a point—may well be the best way to limit the spread of nuclear weapons in cases such as this one.

When push finally came to shove in 1994, the Clinton administration backed away from the president's firm statement in November 1993 that North Korea "cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear bomb." "The costs, in terms of the other major U.S. and allied interests, were simply too high," Michael J. Mazarr, editor of the *Washington Quarterly*, contends in a 30-page analysis in *International Security* (Fall 1995). "To have enforced nonproliferation in a strict sense would have risked war in Korea, the failure of the South's evolving democracy, the collapse of North Korea and a costly and violent unification, and new tensions between the

United States and Japan, Russia, and China."

Moreover, tougher U.S. approaches probably would not have worked, Mazarr maintains. China, South Korea, Russia, and Japan did not want war or the rapid disintegration of North Korea, and all were reluctant to cooperate in imposing economic sanctions. Nor were "surgical" air strikes against North Korea's nuclear facilities in Yongbyon feasible. "Even if the U.S. military had known what to hit," Mazarr says, "the North Koreans had been digging shelters deep into hard rock, impervious to most precision weapons." And the target—the alleged cache of plutonium, illegally taken from its nuclear reactor—"was small enough to fit inside a football, and U.S. officials had no idea whatsoever where it might be."

Estimates vary as to how many, if any, nuclear weapons North Korea has produced, notes Brian Bridges, a senior lecturer at Lingnan College, Hong Kong, in the *World Today* (June 1995). The defecting son-in-law of the regime's prime minister claimed in mid-1994 that the North had manufactured five bombs. But U.S. intelligence sources believe "one or two crude models" is more likely, Bridges says. Japanese defense officials are still skeptical as to whether even one crude bomb has been made.

The Korean peninsula is often called a powder keg. Neither North Korea nor South Korea is satisfied with the division that has been in place since the 1953 armistice ending the Korean War. Yet political scientist David C. Kang points out in *Asian Survey* (Mar. 1995) that despite minor incidents, the Korean situation has been stable

for more than four decades. North Korea, it is often noted, is a highly militarized society with an estimated one million men under arms, compared with South Korea's 600,000. But the South's forces are better trained and have superior equipment and logistical support, Kang points out.

"The U.S. deployment [of 34,700 troops] in South Korea makes deterrence robust and the chances of war on the peninsula are remote. North Korea, for all its bluster regarding the South, has never challenged the U.S.-ROK [Republic of Korea] deterrent," Kang notes. The threat of U.S. nuclear reprisals against North Korea makes that deterrent all the more effective.



North Korean nuclear weapons would not significantly change the balance of power on the Korean peninsula, Kang contends. "North Korea cannot hope to win a war against the United States, and stability is thus maintained; if the U.S. commitment to the South remains strong, the likelihood of war on the peninsula is slight."

Henry Sokolski, executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, agrees. The real danger from a nuclear-armed North Korea, he writes in *Comparative Strategy* (Oct.-Dec. 1995), is that it "can use coercive nuclear diplomacy on its neighbors and adversaries."

Indeed, notes Brian Bridges, North Korea already "has been able to play the 'nuclear card' very effectively," not only to get the agreement in 1994 but since. Pyongyang has repeatedly balked at implementing the agreement—demanding additional aid, refusing at first to accept light-water reactors built by South Korea, obstructing regular international inspections, and threatening to resume its nuclear program—all in hopes of extracting new U.S. concessions or disrupt-

ing the U.S.-Japanese-South Korean alliance. At the moment, the various obstacles have apparently been overcome, but it is likely that more obstacles will arise in the future.

There comes a point where "appeasement" must stop, the analysts agree. "Washington and Seoul cannot become so wedded" to the 1994 agreement, Michael Mazarr writes, "that they allow North Korean provocations to go unpunished." The risk of war would only increase.

"North Korea has worked toward a nuclear capability," observes Moon Young (Michael) Park, special aide to the defense attaché in the Republic of Korea's Washington embassy, expressing his personal views in *Foreign Policy* (Winter 1994-95), "primarily because that capability is its sole source of diplomatic power. . . . Given that North Korea's actual use of nuclear weapons is out of the question, the international community should take its nuclear development not as a threat but rather as a bluff. We should not allow the communists in Pyongyang to continue manipulating us. The regime will fall sooner or later, despite its nuclear capability; having the bomb will not save it, as was amply demonstrated by the collapse of the Soviet Union."

With its Soviet patron gone, North Korea is isolated and in bad shape economically. Food shortages and small-scale food riots have been reported. The death in 1994 of Kim Il Sung, who had ruled the People's Democratic Republic of Korea since its founding in 1948, marks, Brian Bridges believes, the beginning of the end for the regime. Kim's son and chosen successor, Kim Jong Il, has made few public appearances since his father's death and has yet to be named president and party general secretary.

Some have charged that the 1994 agreement is only propping up the moribund communist regime. But Mazarr points out that Washington and Seoul are agreed that "some sort of a softer landing" would be better than a sudden collapse leading to "a rapid and unstable unification." Until that "landing," soft or not, occurs, however, it appears that the problem of North Korea's nuclear "threat" will continue to exist.