



# WIIS Issue Brief

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In This Issue: North Korea and the Difficult Path to Nonproliferation  
*Featured Authors are WIIS Members*

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## **North Korea Raises the Stakes**

By: Karen Ruth Adams and Kimberly Hannon

It is not hard to discern why North Korea wants nuclear weapons. Repeatedly occupied by Japan, attacked by China, and subject to the intervention of Russia, Britain, and the US, Koreans are determined to maintain their independence. During the Cold War, South Korea survived with the help of the US, while North Korea received assistance from Russia. After U.S.-led forces flooded north during the Korean War (in which 2.5 million North Koreans died or were wounded and 2/5 of Korean industrial facilities and 1/3 of homes were destroyed),<sup>1</sup> North Korea received Chinese aid, as well. Since the demise of the Soviet Union and the opening of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, North Korea has had to rely on its own devices to maintain its sovereignty in the face of 36,000 US and 672,000 South Korean troops on its border,<sup>2</sup> the absence of a peace treaty ending the Korean war,<sup>3</sup> and persistent U.S. sanctions and non-recognition.<sup>4</sup> North Korea's reaction has been to develop and acquire the weapons that for more than 50 years have kept the peace among the major states in the international system.

Three U.S. presidents have dealt with a nuclearizing North Korea. In 1989, when George H. W. Bush learned of satellite photographs of new construction at a nuclear complex near Yongbyon, he traded relaxation of economic sanctions and discussions about recognition for North Korean compliance with the inspection provisions of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) inspections began in 1992.

In 1994, when North Korea refused to let IAEA inspectors monitor the transfer of irradiated fuel and threatened to reprocess that fuel, Bill Clinton considered a preemptive attack to destroy the Yongbyon reactor. According to former Secretary of Defense William Perry, "there was no question that it could be done."<sup>5</sup> But this would dramatically increase the odds that North Korea would follow through on its threat to strike South Korea in response to an attack on itself. According to former Assistant Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, analysts were certain that if the North attacked the South, the U.S. "would, within just a few weeks, destroy North Korea's armed forces ... and ...

regime.” Preoccupied with the “many, many thousands” of people who would die in such an operation,<sup>6</sup> Clinton pushed for UN sanctions instead. When North Korea responded with a threat to turn Seoul into “a sea of flames,” former President Jimmy Carter went to Pyongyang to initiate a diplomatic deal that would become known as the Agreed Framework: North Korean shut down of Yongbyon and cessation of plutonium production in exchange for U.S. assistance with the construction of light-water reactors for energy production and further relaxation of sanctions.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the Agreed Framework, in 1998 North Korea tested a Taepodong missile capable of striking Japan. That the agreement did not deter North Korea from pursuing military capabilities is not surprising. It changed little on the ground. South Korea continued to host the third-largest deployment of U.S. troops in the world, no progress was made on a peace treaty, many of the economic sanctions remained, and the U.S. still did not recognize the North Korean government.

Although Perry and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang in 1999 and 2000 to discuss some of these issues, George W. Bush came into office with the intention of abandoning the Agreed Framework and replacing Clinton’s policy of engagement with one of greater isolation. After another Taepodong test, the administration decided to resume talks, but on different issues and only multilaterally.<sup>8</sup>

In his state of the union address in January 2002, Bush warned that the US would militarily preempt any effort to obtain nuclear weapons, and he labeled North Korea part of the “Axis of Evil” with Iraq and Iran.<sup>9</sup> Although the preemption doctrine should have applied first to North Korea, whose nuclear program was most advanced, U.S. officials told Seymour Hersch that “the Administration’s goal ... was to mobilize public opinion for an invasion of Iraq” and that “the Bush people knew that the North Koreans had already reinvigorated their programs and were more dangerous than Iraq.”<sup>10</sup>

Although the U.S. proceeded to attack Iraq instead of North Korea, North Korea’s reaction to Bush’s speech was to say that the U.S. was “little short of declaring war”<sup>11</sup> and to disclose that it was working on and would not halt a uranium enrichment program. After the U.S., Japan, and South Korea retaliated by halting fuel oil shipments, North Korea sent IAEA inspectors home, withdrew from the NPT, and announced it was restarting the plutonium reactor at Yongbyon. By February 2005, the Foreign Ministry declared that North Korea had manufactured nuclear weapons, and in March it declared North Korea a nuclear weapons state.<sup>12</sup> In October 2006, North Korea demonstrated its nuclear capability by conducting a test.

When asked by Siegfried Hecker and other scholars why they developed and tested nuclear weapons, North Korean officials stated that “the role of their nuclear weapons is to deter the United States and defend the sovereignty of their state” and that the test allowed them to “[demonstrate] their deterrent.” They emphasized, ‘DPRK needs the deterrent; otherwise it can’t defend its sovereignty.’”<sup>13</sup>

From 1989 to 2006, North Korea raised the stakes on any attack on its territory. In 1994, the Clinton administration was deterred from destroying the Yongbyon facilities by the prospect of a bloody conventional war. In 2002, the Bush administration was deterred from making North Korea a test case for its preemption policy by the possibility that North Korea had nuclear weapons the U.S. did not know about. Today the administration is deterred from military action to change the North Korean regime and compel its disarmament by the cold, hard fact that North Korea has both

nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them to targets the US values, including US forces, bases, and allied populations and governments in South Korea and Japan.<sup>14</sup>

Before the nuclear test, U.S. officials routinely characterized the possibility that North Korea would develop nuclear weapons as “a disaster for our security in many ways”<sup>15</sup> and asserted that the US was “not going to live with a nuclear North Korea.”<sup>16</sup> In May 2005, the Bush administration warned North Korea that the U.S. would take punitive action in response to any nuclear test. In the two months since October 2006, however, North Korea has not attacked or blackmailed anyone, and US policy has changed little. Although the Bush administration sought strong UN sanctions, to ensure passage of the resolution it allowed them to be watered down by Russia and China.<sup>17</sup>

Two months is, of course, not very long, and there is no one to prevent North Korea from engaging in nuclear first strikes or nuclear trafficking. But there are good reasons to expect North Korean restraint. North Korea has repeatedly said it “will not use nuclear weapons first, nor give them to terrorists like al Qaeda. We make these expensive weapons to defend our right to survive.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, since the end of the Korean War, North Korea has consistently acted to increase its military security. Although this has come at a very high price for the North Korean people, it has not been at the price of annihilation. North Korea, like other nuclear states, will use its nuclear weapons to deter attacks on its territory and vital interests, and will remember that the cost of nuclear trafficking could be nuclear retaliation.

Even if North Korea agrees to dismantle its nuclear weapons and terminate its nuclear activities, it will remain a nuclear-capable state. Never again will a U.S. administration be able to consider attacking North Korea without acknowledging the possibility of overwhelming retaliation. Relations between North Korea and the U.S. will increasingly resemble relations between the USSR and the US during the Cold War. There will be periods of cooling and periods of détente. There will be sanctions and engagement. There will be arms buildups and arms reductions. But there will be no direct confrontation. It is simply too dangerous.

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## **The Difficulty of Achieving Nuclear Cooperation with North Korea**

By: Amanda Tomney

It's hard to open up a newspaper without reading about North Korea leaving international talks over their nuclear program or reluctantly rejoining such discussions weeks later. Trying to reach consensus with North Korea's rogue leader, Kim Jong-Il, has been an arduous and unsuccessful process. On October 9 2006, North Korea announced that they had performed their first-ever nuclear weapon test and we have yet to see the international community react with effective measures. Examining the situation with North Korea through the lens of international relations theory helps us understand why it is so difficult to forge a lasting agreement with North Korea.

First off, it is important to recognize that North Korea is a sovereign state and that their interactions with other states occur under no higher authority. When it comes down to it, nobody can truly stop North Korea from doing what it wants to do with its nuclear program, short of military intervention. Other states and non-state actors can try to enact change via economic sanctions or political shunning but North Korea may choose to deal with the repercussions of such actions if they deem their nuclear program that important.

When we look at the reasons why North Korea pursues a nuclear weapon program it becomes difficult to create an argument to dissuade them from doing so. One obvious incentive of nuclear weapons is their role as a “strategic equalizer” to other countries that have the bomb. From North Korea’s perspective, the implied nuclear threats of the United States must be taken seriously. In September 1991, for example, George H.W. Bush made it clear to Seoul that South Korea was still protected by the US nuclear umbrella. To Pyongyang this could only mean that the US was still prepared to use nuclear weapons against it. Following theories of security, North Korea would want to equalize their military capabilities relative to other countries in an effort to secure itself especially considering their lack of allies. Even though we know from the security dilemma that actions to increase your relative security result in no true security gains, it is very difficult to convince a country to abandon plans that, in theory, would make them a military equal of another country.

North Korea may also be pursuing its nuclear program for the international power that such weapons command. Independent of their strategic role, nuclear weapons can have political rationales. Simply put, states are taken more seriously as players in the world of geopolitics when they are nuclear-armed. North Korea can use international concern over their weapons as bargaining leverage that in turn increases their international power. In the early 1990s North Korea desperately wanted to suspend Team Spirit, a joint effort to deter North Korean war provocations and encourage security cooperation. In 1992, the U.S. and South Korea were determined to persuade Kim Jong-Il to sign the overdue Nuclear Safeguards Agreement and, desperate to strike an agreement, South Korea conceded and suspended Team Spirit like North Korea wanted. This is one of many examples of North Korea using international concern about its nuclear program as a bargaining tool.

Looking at the qualifications of credible threat, it becomes clear that the U.S. does not make credible threats to persuade North Korea from abandoning its nuclear weapon program and rejoining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The first part of the recipe for a credible commitment is to clarify what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Although one can infer what North Korea and the United States want, it is hard to create and reiterate a relationship because this usually takes place in international organizations where there is repeated interaction and clear standards of what is expected. With North Korea in bad standing with the NPT and IAEA, it is difficult to even set the stage for international cooperation. The second and third requirements for a credible commitment entail making it clear that unacceptable behavior will have specific, negative consequences and that the costs of following through on the commitment will be less than living with the unacceptable behavior. This is very difficult when it comes to nuclear weapons because there is something inherently different with weapons of this magnitude. If the United States were to use force (nuclear or non-nuclear) to compel North Korea to change their nuclear behavior, we run the risk of them massively retaliating with nuclear weapons. In this case, the cost of following through with the commitment (nuclear attack on U.S. soil, for example) would not be less than living with the unacceptable behavior of North Korea refusing international cooperation.

In comparing North Korea’s history and current situation with established concepts of international relations, it becomes clear why it is so hard for North Korea and the rest of the international

community to reach a substantial, lasting agreement. Most recently, North Korea agreed to return to the six-party talks after widespread international condemnation and United Nations-backed sanctions of the October 9<sup>th</sup> test. The talks are set to resume mid-December, although it would not be surprising if North Korea backed out before they even begin. While this application of international relations theory seems pessimistic, we can be thankful that we are taking steps to understand the rationale behind North Korea's actions. This understanding is, surely, a predecessor to any sort of lasting international cooperation.

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## **Applying the Lessons of South Africa to North Korea**

By: Sarah Franz

In the case of North Korea and its decision to develop nuclear weapons, the United States' attempts at diplomacy have largely failed. And, if the past example of South Africa provides any guide, the current situation simply is not favorable for diplomacy to be effective. A comparison of the two cases presents several similarities and illustrates some of the obstacles we face in our diplomatic approach to North Korea.

During the 1970s, South Africa embarked on developing nuclear weapons, a decision they would later reverse, give up their nuclear ambitions, and become signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. While their motives in embarking on development of nuclear weapons is largely debatable, conventional wisdom states that their decision to give up their nuclear ambitions was either one of two reasons (or perhaps both) – either they no longer felt threatened, or international pressure was enough to convince them to change their course.

North Korea's motives for developing nuclear weapons can be discerned a bit more easily, and not just for the most apparent reasons such as the war that has lasted fifty years between North and South or the infamous "Axis of Evil" speech, but due to the United States' newly adapted policy of regime change in favor of democratization and what that implies for the North Korean leadership. But what of a motive to abandon nuclear ambitions? A drawdown of troops on the Korean peninsula does not appear likely (unless, of course, it becomes necessary to divert them to Iraq), the United States has not reversed itself with regard to its regime change policy, and no amount of diplomatic pressure applied to North Korea thus far has succeeded. In addition to the conventional wisdom, many argue that ignoring North Korea may be a more effective policy, that Kim Jong-Il's main motivation for development and recent testing of nuclear weapons is in fact a call for attention and perhaps aid. Since ignoring North Korea is not likely to be an acceptable risk, especially considering that the regime has gone so far as to test a nuclear weapon, we may be unable to create an incentive to disarm.

Peter Liberman, in "The Rise and Fall of the South African Bomb," points out how closely in time South Africa's decision to abandon their nuclear ambitions coincided with their decision to also abandon a policy of apartheid, and how the decision to give up apartheid in many ways made South Africa more susceptible to the voice of the international community. In many ways the North Korea

situation is similar. Not only does the United States disagree on the nuclear non-proliferation issue, but it also disagrees with the North Korean regime on human rights (arguably so does most of the rest of the world) and their heavy-handed policies toward their own people. The United States can attempt to punish North Korea diplomatically, but due to the fact that the U.S. have not had any sort of normalized relations with North Korea for years, there is not likely to be enough of a change felt in two nations' relationship to catalyze a change on the nuclear issue. Much like in the South Africa case, our message is likely to be confused by our actions – the U.S. could not bring a nation to the community of nations that engaged in a practice such as apartheid, just as North Korea knows that it will not likely be brought into the community of nations given its oppressive and cruel policies toward its citizens.

And so we come to today's situation – how do we formulate a policy to deal with North Korea? If we decided to try to remove their feelings of insecurity by reversing our policy on regime change, then we might be seen as declaring both campaigns in the Global War on Terror to be misguided policy maneuvers. And even if we were able to resolve the nuclear issue, how much would U.S. policy toward North Korea really change? The U.S. might provide a greater amount of aid for the good of the people, but could it ever have normalized relations with a regime such as Kim Jong Il's, or does regime change need to happen, in one way or another, for the two nations to be able to work out their differences?

There is one more option on the table – and that is to deal with the North Korean regime, and while not condoning their human rights policy, in bringing them into the community of nations, the U.S. can still hope that some positive change takes place. There is another case in history to consider here – China. While the United States and China still disagree over human rights, democracy, and policy with regard to the Taiwan Straits, China and the United States have co-existed peacefully for years. And for this to happen, the United States was required to recognize Communist China as the legitimate government of China no matter how much it pained it to do so. And as a result, some progress has happened in China with regard to human rights as well as the economic situation, two things that would greatly alleviate the suffering of North Koreans, and might in turn allow diplomatic channels to open between the two nations.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Korea: Armistice and Aid,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2005), Vol. 22, p. 501.

<sup>2</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1998/99* (London: Oxford, 1998), pp. 187-188. In 1989, the US Congress voted to reduce troops in South Korea from 43,000 to 36,000 by 1991. Currently there are 22,500 US troops in South Korea, as many have been redeployed to Iraq. “Military: US Forces Order of Battle,” <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/korea-orbat.htm> .

<sup>3</sup> South Korean President Syngman Rhee accepted a ceasefire on July 9, 1953, however no South Korean official ever signed the document, and no peace treaty was negotiated. “Korea: Armistice and Aid.” “United States of America: The Korean War,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2005), Vol. 29, p. 260. In 1953, the Military Armistice Commission (MAC) was created to oversee and enforce the terms of the

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armistice. Over the past decade, North Korea has sought to dismantle the MAC in a push for a new "peace mechanism" on the peninsula. In April 1994, it declared the MAC void and withdrew its representatives. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, *Background Note: North Korea* (October 2006), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2792.htm>. In 2005, North Korea renewed its call for a formal peace treaty. Arthur Bright, "A formal end to the Korean War?." *Christian Science Monitor*, August 9, 2005, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0809/dailyUpdate.html>

<sup>4</sup> The US imposed a "near total economic embargo on North Korea in June 1950" and has never had diplomatic relations with North Korea. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, *Background Note: North Korea* (October 2006), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2792.htm> US Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, "Independent States in the World," December 8, 2006, <http://www.state.gov/s/inr/rls/4250.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Frontline interview with William Perry for "Kim's Nuclear Gamble," February 26, 2003, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kim/interviews/perry.html>

<sup>6</sup> Frontline interview with Ashton Carter for "Kim's Nuclear Gamble," March 2, 2003, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kim/interviews/acarter.html>

<sup>7</sup> Frontline chronology for "Kim's Nuclear Gamble," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kim/etc/cron.html>

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, *Background Note: North Korea*.

<sup>9</sup> State of the Union Address, The United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., January 29, 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

<sup>10</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, "The Cold Test: What the Administration knew about Pakistan and the North Korean nuclear program," *New Yorker*, January 27, 2003, [http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/030127fa\\_fact?030127fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/030127fa_fact?030127fa_fact)

<sup>11</sup> North Korea's official state newspaper as quoted in Frontline's chronology for "Kim's Nuclear Gamble," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kim/etc/cron.html>

<sup>12</sup> "Timeline: North Korea's Nuclear Test," *New York Times*, November 27, 2006, <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/northkorea/index.html?8qa>

<sup>13</sup> Siegfried S. Hecker, "Report on North Korean Nuclear Program," Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, Nov. 15, 2006, pp. 2, 7, <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/dprk/nuke/hecker1106.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> The Bush administration has consistently belittled Kim Il Sung and used strong rhetoric about regime change and disarmament. According to a US intelligence official interviewed by Seymour Hersh, "'Bush and Cheney want that guy's head'—Kim Jong Il's—'on a platter. Don't be distracted by all this talk about negotiations. There will be negotiations, but they have a plan, and they are going to get this guy after Iraq. He's their version of Hitler.'" Hersh, "The Cold Test."

<sup>15</sup> Frontline interview with Ashton Carter.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Hill, the chief Bush administration negotiator on North Korea, as quoted in "North Korea: The nightmare comes to pass," Oct. 12, 2006, *Economist*, [http://www.economist.com/research/backgrounders/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story\\_id=8028537](http://www.economist.com/research/backgrounders/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=8028537)

<sup>17</sup> The resolution demands North Korea eliminate all its nuclear weapons, bans the import or export of material and equipment that could be used to make nuclear weapons or ballistic missiles, and orders states to freeze the assets of and ban travel for anyone supporting North Korea's weapons programs. At Russian and Chinese insistence, interception and inspection of North Korean vessels was allowed but not required, a total weapons embargo was

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scrapped for a provision prohibiting only “high end” military equipment, and military action against North Korea was ruled out. UN Security Council Resolution 1718, October 14, 2006, <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/572/07/PDF/N0657207.pdf?OpenElement>. Associated Press, “UN Security Council votes to impose sanctions on North Korea,” *Guardian*, October 14, 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/korea/article/0,,1922804,00.html>

<sup>18</sup> As quoted by Hecker, “Report on North Korean Nuclear Program,” p. 7.