

The Twin Peaks of Pyongyang

by Ralph C. Hassig and Kongdan Oh

Ralph C. Hassig (kohrch@verizon.net) is a Washington, D.C.-based consultant on North Korea and an adjunct professor of psychology at the University of Maryland University College. He is the co-author, with Kongdan Oh, of *North Korea through the Looking Glass* (Brookings, 2000). **Kongdan Oh** (kohrch@verizon.net) is a research staff member at the Institute for Defense Analyses and a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who has written extensively on North Korean affairs. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of any organizations with which the authors are affiliated.

The United States has been negotiating with North Korea in an effort to have it renounce its nuclear program for over a decade, since Washington negotiated an Agreed Framework in 1994. In this time, North Korea has only amassed more plutonium. The negotiations are hindered by mutual distrust and hostility, but it is doubtful whether any change in Washington's attitude toward the DPRK would help solve the nuclear issue. It is the Kim regime that is the core problem. Until the regime is removed, there can be no durable peace in the region. This article suggests that with the prospect for a negotiated resolution of the nuclear issue remote, and since any attempt to remove the Kim regime militarily would entail huge costs, Washington might consider a third option: directly engaging the North Korean people.

What's past is prologue, and the best indication of what is to come. Unfortunately, the history of North Korea's nuclear diplomacy—marked by threats, arduous negotiations, and violated agreements—does not hold out much hope for a non-nuclear future on the Korean peninsula.

The North Korean nuclear program began with Soviet assistance in the 1960s and progressed as North Korean expertise did in the 1970s. In the 1980s the North Koreans commissioned the Soviet Union to build them two modern light-water nuclear reactors (LWRs) for power generation, but the project fell through when the North Koreans failed to make the payments owed. Nuclear research evidently turned to weapons manufacture sometime during this period, judging by the fact that a reprocessing plant to make weapons-grade plutonium from irradiated reactor fuel was constructed in the latter half of the 1980s. In early conversations with the Soviets, the North Koreans referred to

their nuclear facilities as the “furniture factory.” They later dubbed the reprocessing plant a “radiochemical laboratory,” although it hardly looked like a laboratory, standing six stories tall and covering the area of two football fields. When U.S. intelligence learned of this facility in the late 1980s, North Korea’s nuclear program became a security issue for the United States.

In the early 1990s, the Kim Il Sung regime finally accepted the IAEA inspections it had agreed to during the LWR negotiations with the Soviets seven years earlier. When the inspectors discovered that Pyongyang’s nuclear reporting had been false, the North Koreans stopped the inspections and threatened to withdraw from the IAEA’s Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, claiming that the IAEA was a political tool of the United States. Throughout this period Kim Il Sung repeatedly assured the international community that his country had no intention of building a nuclear weapon, which he said would be useless in the face of a massive American nuclear arsenal.¹ However, the North Koreans did continue to build two larger nuclear reactors that would produce the kind of spent fuel useful for reprocessing into weapons-grade plutonium.

Freezing and Unfreezing the Nuclear Program

To halt the nuclear program, which the CIA believed might have produced sufficient plutonium for two small nuclear devices, the United States negotiated an Agreed Framework in 1994 that would provide the North Koreans with the LWRs the Soviets had failed to build for them. In the meantime, the United States would deliver an annual supply of a half million barrels of heavy fuel oil, ostensibly to compensate Pyongyang for energy forgone by halting construction of the two larger nuclear reactors. In return, North Korea was supposed to freeze its nuclear program and allow IAEA monitoring, although IAEA investigations to determine how much plutonium had already been manufactured would not be permitted until a major portion of the LWR project was completed.

Working with the North Korean bureaucracy demands painstaking and time-consuming negotiation over every little issue. Predictably, the LWR project fell far behind schedule. By 2003, the target date for completion, only the reactor foundation had been built. Nor had the United States significantly eased economic restrictions on the DPRK, as called for in the Agreed Framework. Mutual steps toward establishing diplomatic relations between the United States and the DPRK were likewise delayed when the North Koreans balked at opening liaison offices in Washington and Pyongyang. In the United States, the Agreed Framework was not politically popular with Congress, owing to widespread belief that it rewarded North Korea for failing to abide by

¹ For example, “Q&A ‘We Don’t Need Nuclear Weapons,’ ” *Washington Times*, Apr. 15, 1992.

its prior commitments to the IAEA. Opponents of the agreement were also concerned because the fuel used to power the two large LWRs could be reprocessed into weapons material, although the reprocessing would admittedly be difficult to accomplish with North Korea's present technology.

Meanwhile, it appears that the North Koreans decided to develop an alternative means of securing nuclear weapons material by starting a secret uranium-enrichment program. Although signs of this program were reportedly detected by U.S. intelligence agencies in the late 1990s, the Clinton administration chose not to make its suspicions public. In fact, it seemed to be on course to improve relations with the DPRK and to negotiate another agreement, this time on freezing North Korea's long-range missile program. News of a uranium-enrichment program became public when then-Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly confronted the North Koreans with evidence of the program in October 2002. According to the Kelly team, the North Korean delegation initially admitted the existence of such a program but then quickly changed their tune. Since that time, the North Koreans have vigorously denied they have a uranium-enrichment program, but have offered to "clarify" any evidence the United States might present to the contrary.²

It is hard to imagine how the North Korean government, with its 8,000 underground tunnels and caves, could prove that it does not have hidden nuclear materials. The recent experience of searching for nuclear materials in Iraq provides fair warning that playing hide-and-seek with a secretive regime is a losing game. The last time the United States received permission to search a North Korean cave complex, at Kumchang-ni in 1999, the search was made possible only by a U.S. donation of several hundred thousand tons of food aid, costing about \$150 million. The gigantic cave complex was reportedly empty, but that did not stop the Americans from conducting a follow-up search a year later under the original inspection protocol.³

In order to pressure the United States to allow resumption of the LWR construction project, which had been stopped shortly after the Kelly visit, the North Koreans announced in October 2003 that they had restarted their research reactor and reprocessed spent fuel that had been stored in canisters as part of the 1994 nuclear freeze. To underline the seriousness of their actions,

² North Korea's chief negotiator to the six-party talks, Kim Kye Gwan, in a CNN interview with Mike Chinoy, Aug. 14, 2005.

³ State Department Spokesman James Rubin said the United States "did not agree to North Korean demands for compensation for the access"; that is, the massive food donation, made through the World Food Program, was not supposed to be linked to the cave search. No one outside the State Department was fooled by this subterfuge, but it did serve to hide the exact tonnage of food aid that was being offered. For a summary, see South Korea's Yonhap news agency, Mar. 17, 1999. The story from the North Korean side was different. Calling the U.S. demand for inspection a "slander" and a "wanton violation of the sovereignty and security of the DPRK," they agreed to a "visit" on payment of an "inspection fee." DPRK foreign ministry spokesman speaking to the (North) Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), Mar. 18, 1999.

the North Koreans announced that the reprocessed plutonium was being used to increase their “nuclear deterrent force.”⁴

The United States has been negotiating with North Korea for over a decade, in two-party, three-party, four-party, and most recently, six-party talks. The six-party talks (also including South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan) began in August 2003, convened twice in 2004, and then again in August 2005. In the meantime, the North Koreans probably amassed sufficient plutonium to make eight or nine nuclear weapons.⁵ When the six-party talks resumed in 2005, the North Koreans declared, “Now that the DPRK has become a full-fledged nuclear weapons state, the six-party talks should be disarmament talks where the participating countries negotiate the issue on an equal footing.” In April 2005, they informed a visiting American, “It is too late for them [the United States] to prevent us from making nuclear weapons, but it is not too late to work out verifiable agreements to prevent any proliferation.” Otherwise, “The United States should consider the danger that we could transfer nuclear weapons to terrorists [and] that we have the ability to do so.”⁶

Pyongyang’s Peacekeeper

In a memorable sketch from the late sixties by the Monty Python group, a mountaineer interviews for a place on an expedition to Mount Kilimanjaro. The expedition’s leader, who suffers from double vision, explains that they will be searching for members of an earlier failed expedition whose objective had been to build a bridge between Kilimanjaro’s twin peaks. In the course of the interview, the expedition leader comes to realize, thanks to the simple expedient of covering one eye while examining a map, that Mount Kilimanjaro in fact has only one peak. Thus, the mystery of the first expedition’s failure is solved.

News reports might lead those who are unfamiliar with the nature of the Kim regime and the history of its nuclear weapons program into believing that the current six-party negotiations have a chance of eliminating nuclear weapons from North Korea. After all, the North Koreans insist that their ultimate goal is the total denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, which they say was the desire of their late god-king, Kim Il Sung (1912–94). It was that same Kim, the instigator of the Korean War, who is reported to have said, “Our republic began with the sublime responsibility toward the cause of world peace and has tenaciously struggled to deter the imperialists’ nuclear arms race

⁴ KCNA, “DPRK to Continue Increasing Its Nuclear Deterrent Force,” Oct. 2, 2003.

⁵ See, e.g., Bradley Graham and Glenn Kessler, “North Korean Nuclear Advance Is Cited,” *Washington Post*, Apr. 29, 2005.

⁶ KCNA, “DPRK FM Spokesman on Denuclearization of Korea,” Mar. 31, 2005; reported comments of North Korea’s vice foreign minister Kim Kye Gwan to Selig Harrison, *Kyodo World Service*, Apr. 9, 2005.

and maneuvers for a nuclear war.”⁷ The justification for developing nuclear weapons given by the current Kim Jong Il regime is that by deterring a U.S. attack on the DPRK, those weapons prevent war and preserve peace, and in that sense they “do not run counter to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.”⁸ Nuclear weapons may not be consistent with denuclearization, but they are consistent with the same theory of deterrence that enabled the former Strategic Air Command, deliverer of America’s nuclear weapons, to adopt the motto “Peace Is Our Profession” and dub their most lethal missile, the nuclear-tipped MX missile, the “Peacekeeper.”

In fact, it is difficult to find even a single American expert on North Korea who believes that the Kim regime would completely abandon its nuclear weapons program, no matter what inducements were offered. Even if North Korea did agree to fully dismantle its nuclear weapons program, including the uranium-enrichment program it denies having, verification of such an agreement would be as difficult as scaling Kilimanjaro’s second peak. Historically, North Korean promises and threats, while not totally without basis in fact, are only loosely predictive of Pyongyang’s future actions. Hence the attractiveness for Washington of a “Libyan model” whereby the Kim regime, having undergone a radical change of character, would open the entire country to nuclear inspections. But there is no sign that Kim Jong Il has seen the light. Quite the contrary.

North Korea’s guiding ideology is Kim Jong Il’s “military-first” politics, a direct descendent of his father’s Four Military Lines, which transformed North Korea into a garrison state. The North Korean press calls for all citizens to imitate the military and be unquestioningly obedient to the party and eager to sacrifice their lives for the leader and the country. Kim’s military-first politics have also helped secure the loyalty of the generals of the Korean People’s Army, even while the country continues to struggle with economic hardships that have severely weakened the military.

North Korea puts great faith in arms: “Apart from the gun barrel and the single-hearted unity that reliably guarantee the country’s sovereignty, it is impossible to guarantee. . . peace and security.”⁹ Marshal Kim Jong Il, the supreme commander of the Korean People’s Army, rules the country in his position as chairman of the National Defense Commission. North Koreans are told that without their brave leader’s military-first politics, they would long ago have become slaves of the American imperialists. Such a militarized country hardly seems ready to give up its most powerful weapon.

⁷ Ryu Yong Su, “Denuclearization of Korean Peninsula Is Our Consistent Strategic Goal,” *Minju Choson* (Pyongyang), June 5, 2005.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “The General Onward March of the Military-First Revolution Is the Heroic March of Our Times,” editorial bureau special article in the party newspaper *Nodong Sinmun*, July 19, 2005.



Twin brothers dedicate flowers to the bronze statue of Kim Il Sung at Mansudae in Pyongyang in August 2005, during celebrations of the 60th anniversary of liberation from Japanese colonial rule. (AP/Wide World Photos)

North Koreans are wary of foreigners. Kim Jong Il distrusts everyone, at home and abroad; not just the Americans, but also his closest “friends,” the Chinese and the Russians. Whether this distrust reflects paranoia, bitter lessons of history, a strong belief in political realism, or a keen appraisal of North Korea’s standing in the international community (the truth is that neither the Chinese nor the Russians like the Kim regime), it is one more reason for Kim and his generals to hold onto a powerful deterrent and not entrust their security to an international agreement.

Perhaps the best reason for believing that the Kim regime would never completely give up its nuclear weapons potential is that this very program has become its biggest export commodity. What other country as poor as North Korea is courted by all the major powers? With a per capita gross national income of around \$800, North Korea is on par with such countries as Bolivia, Sri Lanka, Georgia, and Nicaragua, whereas South Korea is a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Yet despite having little to offer, the North Koreans are good at marketing themselves. Kim Jong Il increases his cachet by rarely meeting anyone, including his own people. As he once said, “Why should I travel to see other leaders when they come to see me?” If Kim irrevocably gave up his nuclear program, the international community could lose interest in supporting North Korea’s inefficient economy. And who would want to pay a call on a small-time dictator?

Set against these benefits of nuclear weapons is at least one strong reason to relinquish the nuclear threat; namely, that by brandishing nuclear weapons Kim invites a preemptive attack from the United States. The odds of such an attack may be low.¹⁰ Not only is the U.S. military engaged elsewhere, but also North Korea’s nuclear materials are probably widely dispersed and well hidden, and in any case the Korean People’s Army holds Seoul hostage to attack from non-nuclear weapons, including an estimated one hundred 170-millimeter self-propelled guns and two hundred 240-millimeter rocket launchers that together could throw several thousand conventional and chemical warheads per hour at the city before being silenced in 24 to 48 hours by counter-fire. Yet Kim must walk a narrow path, flaunting his nuclear deterrent while at the same time holding out hope to the international community that the deterrent will be abandoned if the right inducements are offered. Kim’s dexterous foreign policy keeps other countries off balance, unable to figure out what the North Koreans will do next and thereby making it difficult for them to calculate future costs and benefits.

Applying the Seed Theory

In recent years, the North Korean press has credited Kim Jong Il with inventing the “seed theory,” which holds that a problem can only be solved if its

¹⁰ See Scott Stossel, “North Korea: The War Game,” *Atlantic*, July 1, 2005.

essence is understood. Although the Kim regime has a long history of harboring terrorists, committing acts of terrorism, kidnapping foreign nationals, and engaging in drug smuggling and counterfeiting, not to mention committing grave crimes against its own people, the six-party talks have focused narrowly on the regime's nuclear weapons program. On the eve of the new round of talks beginning in August 2005, ROK deputy foreign minister Song Min-soon declared that the sole agenda item for the talks would be the nuclear issue, and that "the human rights issue is not and cannot be an agenda item."¹¹ Not all the participants agree with Song on this point, but they have their hands full just dealing with nuclear politics. In that sense, North Korea is off the hook on any number of other issues that could threaten stability and peace in the region.

The proliferation of WMD, a matter of grave concern for Washington, became linked to terrorism after the 9/11 attacks. Although the Bush administration has said it wants to discuss a broad range of issues with the Kim regime, American negotiators may be so worn down by North Korea's stop-and-go negotiating tactics that they make a deal with Kim to freeze his known nuclear weapons program in exchange for giving him *carte blanche* to do whatever else he wants to. This, in any case, is what the Kim regime is hoping for. Han Song-ryol, North Korea's deputy ambassador to the UN, has said that the United States "must promise that it will coexist with North Korea and it will not intervene in the internal affairs of the North."¹²

Focusing exclusively on the nuclear issue is like treating a serial killer as a first offender. If the Kim regime is able to meet the minimum requirements of a nuclear settlement, it will still have conventional, chemical, and biological weapons, along with ballistic missiles to deliver them anywhere in South Korea and Japan (including U.S. bases in Okinawa). Longer-range missiles are being developed that have the reach, but not necessarily the accuracy, to hit Hawaii and the western continental United States. The real North Korean threat comes not from nuclear weapons, of which other states have far larger inventories, but from the Kim regime's desire to support a feudal dynasty with the resources of *kangsong taeguk*—an economically strong and militarily powerful country. On past indications, even if Kim freezes his nuclear weapons program, he will no doubt find a new threat with which to bargain. Kim and his associates are the core problem, and until they are gone from the scene, there can be no durable peace in the region.

Irreconcilable Differences

The North Koreans demand economic compensation for almost anything they do, including simply showing up for talks, but their central demand

¹¹ "N.K. Human Rights 'Not on Table' for 6-Party Talks," *Korea Times* (Seoul), July 23, 2005.

¹² Kang Chan-ho and Ser Myo-ja, "North's Envoy Lists Conditions," *Joong-ang Ilbo* (Seoul), Feb. 19, 2005.

in recent years has been that the United States make a “bold switchover” in its policy toward the DPRK government. China, Russia, and South Korea agree that U.S. hostility toward North Korea is a serious obstacle to reaching an agreement with North Korea, and they have called for the establishment of trust between the two governments.

What, specifically, are the North Koreans asking for? In August 2003 the official North Korean news agency, KCNA, said that “the only thing the DPRK wants is the conclusion of a non-aggression treaty.”¹³ But according to many other North Korean pronouncements, that is only the beginning. As a nuclear quid pro quo, they have demanded economic compensation for energy lost as a result of freezing their nuclear facilities. They also want the removal of the U.S. “nuclear threat,” by which they seem to mean the removal of all U.S. nuclear weapons from the region and an end to the protection provided to South Korea by the U.S. nuclear umbrella. They want a peace treaty and full diplomatic relations with Washington, a guarantee of non-aggression, the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from South Korea, and an end to the U.S.-ROK security alliance. Additionally, they want the elimination of U.S. restrictions on international trade and investment with the DPRK and a pledge not to interfere in the DPRK’s domestic affairs, including its human rights policies.

On this latter point, the Kim regime has become increasingly sensitive, claiming, “The human rights standards in the DPRK are precisely what the Korean people like and what is in accordance with their requirement and interests.”¹⁴ The regime has characterized the annual UN resolution criticizing North Korea’s human rights practices as an attempt to overthrow the North Korean government.¹⁵ Pyongyang has had harsh criticism for the United States’ North Korean Human Rights Act, passed by Congress in 2004, which DPRK officials call “a declaration of war against our Republic.” The regime says it will “resolutely crush the bastards’ maneuvers to isolate and crush the DPRK by taking a strong countermeasure.”¹⁶

It will be difficult for any U.S. administration to accept the Kim Jong Il regime on its own terms. In October 2000, when a smiling Secretary of State Madeleine Albright sat beside Kim Jong Il to view a mass gymnastics display in Pyongyang marking the 55th anniversary of the Korean Workers’ Party, Kim entertained hopes that perhaps by bargaining hard with his nuclear weapons and missile programs he could gain the United States’ acceptance. When President Bush took office in 2001, Kim’s hopes of a better relationship with the United States were dashed, at least for the moment.

¹³ KCNA headlined article, “KCNA on Main Way for Settlement of Nuclear Issue,” Aug. 19, 2003.

¹⁴ Quoting a DPRK foreign ministry spokesman, KCNA, Mar. 1, 2001.

¹⁵ Quoting a DPRK foreign ministry spokesman, Pyongyang Broadcasting Station, Apr. 20, 2005.

¹⁶ Chong Pong-il, “Blatant Declaration of Hostility Against the DPRK,” (North) Korean Central Broadcasting Station, Oct. 7, 2004.

North Korea's criticism of it is a sign that the Bush administration is being brutally honest, if not diplomatic, about the true nature of the Kim regime. In response to personal attacks on him in the DPRK press, Japanese deputy secretary general of the Liberal Democratic Party Shinzo Abe, a severe critic of North Korea, said it best: "Nothing is more honorable than this. . . . It would be all over for me if they started praising me."¹⁷

The Kim regime's assessment of the hostile mood in Washington is accurate. Since 2002, when President Bush labeled North Korea a member of the "axis of evil," he has publicly referred to Kim Jong Il as a "dangerous person" and a "tyrant" and said he would not change his opinion until Kim "frees his people."¹⁸ Vice President Cheney called Kim "one of the world's most irresponsible leaders."¹⁹ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice included North Korea, along with Cuba, Burma (Myanmar), Iran, Belarus, and Zimbabwe, in her list of "outposts of tyranny."²⁰

Such criticism of Kim, whom the North Korean press portrays as almost a god, is not taken lightly: "It is our firm stand neither to pardon nor overlook anyone who slanders the supreme headquarters of the DPRK."²¹ North Korea's hostility toward the United States goes back over half a century. In most years, the period between June 25 and July 27 (the beginning and ending dates of the Korean War) is designated as the month of struggle against the United States. The North Korean press has been harsh in its criticism of U.S. government officials, calling Bush "a hooligan bereft of any personality as a human being" and Cheney a "cruel monster and blood-thirsty beast."²² The North Koreans said they would not come to the six-party talks that began in August 2005 until they received an apology for Rice's "outposts of tyranny" remark, but they came anyway. Given history and present circumstances, the chance for an end to the animosity between the two governments is slight.

It is doubtful whether a switchover in Washington's attitude toward the DPRK would indeed solve the outstanding nuclear issue, although the North Koreans have promised that they in turn would make a "bold decision to dispel the U.S. concerns about its security."²³ This promise sounds much like what they said in 1993: "If the United States accepts the DPRK-proposed formula for a

¹⁷ Quoted on the Japanese news service Jiji Web, Nov. 30, 2004.

¹⁸ President Bush's "dangerous person" remark was made at a press conference on Apr. 28, 2005. His characterization of the leader of North Korea as a "tyrant" was made in a Wisconsin political speech on Aug. 18, 2004. The condition of "freeing his people" was made during a visit to Seoul on February 20, 2002.

¹⁹ CNN.com, May 30, 2005.

²⁰ From Secretary Rice's opening remarks to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jan. 18, 2005 ("Rice Remarks").

²¹ KCNA headlined article, "Foreign Ministry Spokesman Slams Bush's Vituperation against DPRK's Supreme Headquarters," Apr. 30, 2005.

²² Quoted in the above KCNA headlined article and in the CNN web site article, respectively.

²³ KCNA headlined article, "KCNA on Main Way for Settlement of Nuclear Issue," Aug. 19, 2003.

package solution [i.e., what was to become the Agreed Framework], all problems related to the nuclear issue including the compliance with the [IAEA] safeguards will be solved and it will not take much time.”²⁴

It is not just that North Korean and U.S. policies are different. Serious contradictions in values underpin these policy differences. The easiest way to recognize these differences would be to live in North Korea for a few weeks. Almost everything that Americans take for granted is forbidden. Even those foreigners who are sympathetic with the North Korean government would find that in North Korea they could not speak out publicly on any issue, because freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press are alien to dictatorships. And yet, many young South Koreans criticize the United States and praise North Korea. In a recent Gallup poll in Korea, almost 70 percent of South Korean youth between the ages of 16 and 25 said that, in the event of a war between the United States and North Korea, they would take North Korea’s side. Yet when they were asked where they would like to live if they had to live somewhere other than South Korea, not one of these 833 young people chose to live in North Korea.²⁵ In her “outposts of tyranny” remarks, Secretary Rice referenced Israeli writer Natan Sharansky’s “town square test”: “If a person cannot walk into the middle of the town square and express his or her views without fear of arrest, imprisonment, or physical harm, then the person is living in a fear society, not a free society.”²⁶ Against the background of different values, any agreement reached between the United States and the DPRK is unlikely to last.

Nightmare Negotiations

“In one sentence, ‘Negotiation with the North is a nightmare,’” said former ambassador to the ROK Steven Bosworth.²⁷ Given the initiative’s history to date, the search for a negotiated end to the mutual threats that North Korea and the United States pose is a laudable effort that seems likely to fail. The appearance of a North Korean delegation at any meeting is awaited with apprehension, because DPRK delegations often fail to appear, even though the Kim regime usually receives some form of payment simply for agreeing to a meeting. Difficult and often fruitless though they may be, negotiations with North Korea are important if for no other reason than that they offer some prospect that problems on the Korean peninsula can be solved without resorting to arms.

²⁴ “We Have No Idea of Having Dialogue under Pressure, DPRK FM Spokesman,” KCNA, Nov. 29, 1993.

²⁵ “Poll Finds Pragmatic Patriotism among the Young,” *Chosun Ilbo*, Aug. 15, 2005.

²⁶ Rice Remarks.

²⁷ Seung-Ryun Kim, “U.S. Officials: ‘In Short, Negotiation with the North Is a Nightmare,’” South Korea’s *Dong-A Ilbo*, Mar. 12, 2005.

Except for Japan, the other members of the six-party talks pretend to hold high hopes for a negotiated nuclear settlement, but their calls for compromise suggest that they don't expect to achieve more than a freeze or containment of North Korea's nuclear weapons program, despite the fact that most governments, including those of the United States and the ROK, have gone on record as saying they will "not tolerate" a North Korean nuclear weapons program.²⁸ It is understandable that the ROK, China, and Russia would prefer to let North Korea have a residual nuclear force rather than precipitate another Korean War on their doorstep. In any case, because Japan and the United States would be the most likely targets of Kim's nuclear weapons, the security issue for the ROK, China, and Russia appears to be somewhat different.

The Bush administration hoped that in a multilateral setting it could bring international pressure to bear on North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program. Instead, the United States and Japan are fighting a rear-guard action against North Korea, China, Russia, and South Korea, who all seem to favor an agreement whereby North Korea could keep a nuclear weapons capability for now.

What the Bush administration initially wanted was a "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" (CVID) of the North Korean nuclear weapons program, but because no one can imagine how to verify such an agreement, CVID was dropped from the diplomatic vocabulary, and the United States tried to get North Korea to abandon both its civilian and military nuclear programs. Most other delegations at the six-party talks considered this demand too extreme. The North Koreans said they were as entitled to a civilian nuclear program as anyone else. "Does it make sense if our country, not a war loser nor a criminal country, should be denied peaceful nuclear activities?" they asked.²⁹ Of course there is some difference of opinion between Washington and Pyongyang in regard to whether the DPRK is a criminal state.

Proponents of a nuclear compromise sometimes argue that Kim Jong Il will eventually abandon his nuclear weapons as North Korea becomes integrated into the international community and gains a feeling of security. So far, there is no sign of this happening, although North Korea is more open today than it has ever been. Kim Jong Il represents the interests of only a small group of North Korean elites, and what is good for him is often bad for the 22 million ordinary North Koreans. Providing political, moral, and economic support for the regime strengthens Kim's hold on power, and by that token strengthens his oppressive system.

In addition to the problem of verifying any North Korean agreement, a more immediate and obvious problem is that North Korea rarely honors its

²⁸ For example, see Glenn Kessler, "U.S., S. Korean Leaders Meet to Prod North Korea to Cooperate," *Washington Post*, June 11, 2005.

²⁹ The opinion of North Korea's lead negotiator at the six-party talks, Kim Kye Gwan, quoted by South Korea's Yonhap news agency, Aug. 4, 2005.

political and commercial contracts. The IAEA's nuclear safeguards accord, the two Koreas' Joint Declaration of a Nuclear-Free Korean Peninsula, and the 1994 Agreed Framework were all broken. Whether or not one agrees with the North Koreans that these agreements were first breached by the United States, the fact remains that the agreements failed to achieve their goals, leaving North Korea with a larger nuclear weapons capability than it originally had. Skeptics can well ask why future agreements would be any more successful.

In the 1994 Agreed Framework, the North Koreans were permitted to postpone a full accounting of their nuclear program until some future date. Whether Washington really expected the agreement to rid North Korea of its nuclear weapons capability or viewed it simply as an expedient to freeze the program until North Korea collapsed under the weight of its own political and economic problems is still being debated. In hindsight, it is apparent that the agreement gave Kim Jong Il, just recovering from the death of his father, some breathing room. The defense sometimes offered for the 1994 agreement is that without it, North Korea would have accumulated a much larger nuclear weapons arsenal than it now has, but this argument can be countered with the argument that North Korea's future might have been very different without political support and economic aid from the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

“Words for Words and Action for Action”

The six-party talks are not simply about whether North Korea will agree to abandon its nuclear weapons. The talks are also about power balances in Northeast Asia. China would like to see U.S. influence in the region diminish. Russia simply wants to become a player in the region. Japan seeks protection from North Korea's WMD, and at the same time Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi wants to normalize relations with Pyongyang before he leaves office in 2006. South Korea has several national interests to pursue in the talks. Most important is to take an active role in shaping its future by preventing the United States from attacking North Korea and thereby triggering another Korean War. The South Korean government, especially under its current president, Roh Moo Hyun, is also seeking greater independence in its national security policy by playing what it calls a “balancer” role in the region, which would seem to involve distancing itself somewhat from the United States and achieving reconciliation with the Kim regime.

Perhaps the most important factors at play in the talks are domestic politics. In South Korea, President Roh, who is advised by people openly hostile to the United States, must manage closer relations with Pyongyang while not completely alienating the large segment of older South Koreans who remember that North Korea started the Korean War. In Japan, Prime Minister Koizumi must be sensitive to strong anti-Pyongyang sentiment aroused by past

North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens, especially young women. In the United States, the Bush administration needs to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue without repeating its mistakes in Iraq. In North Korea, Kim Jong Il does not have any immediate worries about domestic political pressures, because his people have not yet found a voice in government and the country's only political party has not convened a congress since 1980. However, he does have to worry that his generals may not approve of giving up their most powerful military weapon.

Whether the United States ultimately acquiesces to North Korea's keeping its civilian nuclear program and preserving some measure of secrecy about its nuclear weapons program will be a matter of making policy trade-offs. Another 1994 agreement would reduce the amount of nuclear material North Korea can accumulate in the next few years. Such an agreement would also strengthen the Kim Jong Il regime and perhaps encourage it to present other threats.

U.S. and North Korean leaders distrust each other. Consistent with their principle of "words for words and action for action," the North Koreans have announced that they will not begin disarming unless they simultaneously receive something in return. North Korea, like India and Pakistan, is a nuclear weapons state. The issue is not how to prevent the North from acquiring nuclear weapons, but how to deal with the new nuclear status quo on the Korean peninsula. President Bush has committed himself to a negotiated settlement, and Secretary Rice insists, "We need to resolve this issue. It cannot go on forever." However, the issue has already been settled and resolved, and it will be a formidable challenge to undo what has already been done.

The Bush administration will be strongly tempted to reach a "words for words" agreement whereby the two sides agree on a set of general principles and take the first tentative steps toward a solution that could later be reversed. In fact, such an agreement, in the form of a joint statement agreed to by the six parties, was reached on September 19, 2005, at the conclusion of the fourth round of six-party talks. The statement asserts that the DPRK is committed to abandoning all of its nuclear weapons and nuclear programs "at an early date" and recognizes the DPRK's claim to a peaceful (i.e., civilian) nuclear energy program. The parties "expressed their respect and agreed to discuss, at an appropriate time" the DPRK's request for LWRS, to which the United States is strongly opposed. The North Koreans succeeded in inserting their long-standing "words for words" principle in the form of a "commitment for commitment, action for action" principle.

The hollowness of the agreement, with its references to "early dates" and "appropriate times," was immediately revealed by a statement from the DPRK foreign ministry, which said that the "essential" part of any agreement would be "for the U.S. to provide LWRS to the DPRK as early as possible." The statement warned, "The U.S. should not even dream of the issue of the DPRK's

dismantlement of its nuclear deterrent before providing LWRs.”³⁰ An agreement such as this merely gives the false appearance of resolving the nuclear issue and getting it off the political agenda; in reality, the issue is simply left for politicians to address at some future date. If the Bush administration is true to its original principles, it will take to heart the words of U.S. State Department spokesperson Tom Casey, who said, “We can’t have a situation where the DPRK pretends to abandon its nuclear weapons program and we pretend to believe them.”³¹ That would be 1994 all over again.

Third Option

If the prospect for a negotiated resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue is remote, and if any attempt to remove the Kim regime militarily is likely to entail catastrophic costs, is there another way to end the Kim regime’s threats? The South Korean government’s approach, initiated by former President Kim Dae Jung’s 1998 “sunshine policy” of engagement, is to offer support and aid to Kim Jong Il in the hope that he will gain a feeling of security and discard his most threatening weapons. Explaining his government’s offer to begin supplying 2 million kilowatts of electricity to North Korea in exchange for an end to its nuclear weapons program, the ROK’s energy minister viewed it as “the cost of peace.”³² So far, South Korean aid has not changed Kim’s mind about a nuclear deterrent, although the South Koreans often attribute North Korea’s intransigence to the U.S. refusal to discard its hostile policy toward the DPRK.

A third option would be to directly engage the North Korean people, bypassing the Kim regime. In their present circumstances, these 22 million people lack the power to change or even question their government’s policies, but if the people had more knowledge, they might gradually gain the power to govern themselves.

Paradoxically, the current ROK administration, which calls itself the “participatory [i.e., people’s] government,” places little faith in ordinary North Koreans, preferring to deal directly with their dictatorial leader. In answer to a question about whether North Korea might collapse, ROK President Roh said that the South Korean government has no intention of working for a collapse, and that the North Korean government has “the organizational capacity to maintain internal control.”³³

President Roh may have a low opinion of the political potential of North Korea’s citizens, but their own leader is afraid of them. Beginning in

³⁰ “Spokesman for DPRK Foreign Ministry on Six-party Talks,” KCNA, Sept. 19, 2005.

³¹ Yonhap news agency, Aug. 4, 2005.

³² Jung Kyung-min and Jung Ha-won, “Seoul Said Ready to Pay ‘Cost of Peace,’” South Korea’s *Joong-ang Ilbo* (English version), July 19, 2005.

³³ President Roh quoted in South Korea’s *Chosun Ilbo*, Apr. 15, 2005.

1989, when North Korea opened its borders to thousands of foreign tourists attending the Thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students, the Kim regime's propaganda and agitation organs began to inoculate citizens against foreign influence by trying to convince them that the socialist life was the only genuine way to live, and that the attractive appearance presented by capitalism was merely an illusion. This propaganda campaign was stepped up after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and in recent years, as North Korea's border with China has become permeable to thousands of North Korean and Chinese refugees and traders, the Kim regime has tried even harder to fight what it calls the "imperialist pollution" of radio broadcasts (including Radio Free Asia), videotapes, DVDs, and compact disks. Fearing their impact as an unauthorized means of communication, the government in 2004 banned cellular telephones, which were becoming popular among wealthier North Koreans.

The DPRK press is straightforward about the threat of outside information:

The bourgeois ideology and culture are nothing but dreadful venom as they weaken the revolutionary and working class consciousness of the popular masses. . . . [T]hose taken by bourgeois ideology and culture cannot but be vulgar men devoid of any faith and ungrateful to the party and the leader. Then the government, army, and people will be torn into fractions, making it impossible to defend their leadership.³⁴

And down goes Kim Jong Il.

The Kim regime's attempt to keep its people ignorant of the outside world is failing miserably as foreign culture spreads through the country, especially in the border areas and larger cities. However, little has been done to inform the people about the true nature of their leader, who has built his personality cult on lies. In this respect, North Korea is different from China, where the rulers keep control through police and military power but at least can claim legitimacy for their successful policies to improve the economic situation.

A large-scale psychological operation needs to be mounted to enlighten the North Korean people. As a part of this operation, humanitarian aid offered directly to the North Korean people could play an important role in communicating to the people that the United States is truly interested in their welfare. Regrettably, no help in any information campaign can be expected from the ROK government, which has dramatically curtailed its own information programs directed toward North Korea in order not to offend Kim Jong Il.

The biggest drawbacks to undermining the Kim regime are, first, that it could take a long time, and second, that the outcome is unpredictable. If the United States had started such an operation in 1994, instead of throwing support to the Kim regime, the job might already have been done. Even if such an operation were successful in informing the North Korean people that their

³⁴ KCNA quoting a *Nodong Sinmun* article of the same date, Aug. 2, 2005.

own government is their worst enemy, the consequences are hard to predict. That, however, is the nature of promoting democracy abroad, which was a major U.S. national security goal for many decades even before the Bush administration put it at the center of its strategy. Bringing sunshine to the North Korean people rather than to the Kim Jong Il regime is a worthy goal that should be supported by the American domestic political audience as well as the international community, and it is this kind of support that the Bush administration very much needs.

