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North Korea and the New Security Paradigm (ARI)

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Theme: A new crisis has emerged on the Korean peninsula as a result of North Korea's latest nuclear tests.

Summary: North Korea's latest nuclear detonation, its ballistic missile tests and its provocative rhetoric have created a new crisis on the Korean peninsula. Rather than try to compel North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks for more desultory negotiations, it is far better to recognise that the security environment in North-East Asia has now fundamentally changed. What is needed instead is a new security paradigm that emphasises deterrence and containment and the importance of America's alliance relations.

Analysis: With the recent testing of its second nuclear device on 25 May, the subsequent launching of a volley of ballistic missiles and the release of a number of highly inflammatory and belligerent threats and warnings, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea), has signalled clearly its intentions to enhance the credibility of its nuclear weapons capabilities, to demonstrate the quality of its ballistic missile programme (perhaps as part of a stepped-up international marketing campaign) and to serve notice to the international community that it will not meekly accept UN Security Council sanctions in response to actions it considers within its sovereign rights.

Cumulatively, these steps announce a new phase in North Korea's relations with the outside world. But what, precisely, does this mean for stability and security in North-East Asia? And what, if anything, can the US, China, South Korea, Japan and Russia –the other members of the Six-Party Talks that have served as the main diplomatic forum dealing with North Korea– do now to halt and eventually roll back North Korea's nuclear weapons programme?

How Did We Get Here?
Like all crises, this one was a long time coming. Liberal commentators in the US and Europe have tended to blame the policies of the George W. Bush Administration for mishandling the North Korea account during the past eight years, thereby leading to the current crisis. They point to President Bush's provocative characterisation of North Korea as part of the 'axis of evil', the 2002 National Security Strategy that highlighted military pre-emption, the invasion of Iraq without the imprimatur of the United Nations and the Administration's misplaced emphasis on the North's pursuit of a uranium enrichment capability for scuppering the 1994 Agreed Framework nuclear deal, which was

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responsible for freezing (and eventually ending) Pyongyang's plutonium separation programme.

Also, five years of on-again, off-again diplomacy revealed deep fissures among key policy-makers inside the Bush Administration over whether to engage North Korea, confront it or ignore it. This ambivalence ran directly contrary to the policy approaches of South Korea under both the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun Administrations, which had invested billions of Korean won in engaging the North directly (whether labelled the 'sunshine' or 'peace and prosperity' policy) in the hope of improving ties. Officials in Washington derisively (and sometimes openly) referred to South Korea's policy as appeasement, especially after the Roh Administration's reluctance to label North Korea the 'main enemy' in its annual Ministry of Defence White Papers and its refusal to censure North Korea before the UN Commission on Human Rights. The result was frayed relations between Washington and Seoul, and the lack of a coherent and consistent US (and allied) diplomatic strategy that contributed to North Korea's decision to withdraw from the Six-Party Talks by the end of President Bush's second term.

More conservative observers, including some Bush Administration veterans, have questioned this analysis. They have argued that a tougher line towards North Korea was warranted to try to reverse some worrying trends that had developed during the 1990s. On the nuclear front, the end of the 1991 Persian Gulf War revealed the scope of Saddam Hussein's nuclear ambitions and how close he came to acquiring secretly a nuclear bomb. US intelligence determined by the mid-1990s that Iran was surreptitiously developing its own nuclear arsenal. India and Pakistan publicly joined the nuclear club with their tests in May 1998.

Wishing to diversify their lethal portfolios, an increasing number of countries also developed other weapons of mass destruction, along with ballistic missiles. By the end of the 1990s, 13 countries were pursuing biological weapons and 16 countries had chemical weapons programmes. Twenty-eight countries had ballistic missiles. Evidence showed a growing trade and cooperation among many of these countries in WMD technologies. Another alarming trend was the unwillingness of members of the international non-proliferation regime to enforce compliance with its own laws, rules and regulations. The United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) proved incapable of stopping, or even slowing down, proliferators.

With respect to North Korea specifically, the 1994 Agreed Framework nuclear deal allowed the North to retain its plutonium (and any nuclear weapons it may have developed) for a number of years, while pocketing energy and food assistance along the way. Further, the Clinton Administration acknowledged in its 1999 and 2000 reports to Congress that North Korea was secretly acquiring a uranium enrichment capability; in other words, it was 'cheating and retreating' from its original commitments. All these developments demanded a stronger response to Pyongyang or else other countries, such as Iran, would draw the logical conclusion that they, too, could defy the international community with impunity and acquire nuclear weapons.

Regardless of where historians will ultimately assign blame for the current crisis (and North Korea should certainly be assigned primary responsibility), two facts are inescapable. First, during this period, North Korea is estimated to have increased its stockpile of fissile material from enough for one or two bombs to enough for five to 12

bombs (according to the unclassified literature), and conducted two nuclear and multiple missile tests. Pyongyang is a far more formidable threat today than it was a decade ago.

Secondly, it is clear that the other parties to the Six-Party Talks have emerged as relative losers, if only because they expressly warned Pyongyang against taking these steps. North Korea not only ignored their entreaties, but engaged in precisely the behaviour it was instructed to avoid. Perhaps the least noted and most astonishing aspect of this entire diplomatic process has been the almost complete inability of four of the world's strongest military and economic powers, including three nuclear-weapons states and three members of the UN Security Council –the US, China, Russia and Japan– to shape the strategic environment in North-East Asia. They have proved to be thoroughly incapable of preventing an impoverished, dysfunctional country of only 23 million people from consistently endangering the peace and stability of the world's most economically dynamic region. This has been nothing less than a collective failure.

Where Do We Go From Here?
One could argue that the real failure of US diplomacy in the Six-Party Talks was not its inability to reach a denuclearisation agreement with North Korea, but was instead Washington's inability to learn whether North Korea was actually willing to surrender its nuclear weapons programme, and if so, at what price. Did Kim Jong-il believe he could safeguard his regime –deter threats or coercion from outside actors– without nuclear arms? Expressed differently, did Kim believe he stood a better chance of sustaining himself in power if he abandoned nuclear weapons, received external economic assistance and started to integrate his country into the broader regional economy?

These questions now seem to have been resoundingly answered. After two nuclear tests, it is hard to conceive of any scenario under which Pyongyang could now be convinced to abandon its nuclear weapons programmes. So, are there any lessons that can be retrieved from the diplomatic wreckage of the past few years that may be useful for the future?

The Obama Administration may be tempted to remain wedded to the old security paradigm and try to coax the North Koreans back to the Six-Party Talks in return for an easing of sanctions, provision of additional food aid, a resumption of energy assistance or other benefits. This has been the default option in the past whenever North Korea has 'misbehaved' –a flurry of diplomatic activity to induce North Korea to come back to the bargaining table, complete with months of cajoling, flattery and outright bribery by some of the other parties–. Sadly, given the duration and extent of these efforts, it sometimes seems as if the sole objective of the Six-Party Talks has been to get Pyongyang simply to show up.

The main reason for this serial emphasis on diplomacy has been the inability of the US and others to provide meaningful coercive pressure on Pyongyang to change its behaviour. Military action is not feasible, especially with the US military still present in Iraq and now escalating its commitment to Afghanistan. Short of risking a second Korean War, full-scale military options (and even those well short of full-scale) have priced themselves out of the market, as indeed they have for the past 50-plus years.

There are four other complicating factors that handicap the implementation of coercive measures that might have a chance of prompting a change in North Korea's nuclear policy. First, previous threats and sanctions against North Korea have proved ineffective,

toothless or worse. Modest economic sanctions have not altered Pyongyang's behaviour, even when there has been rare agreement in the UN Security Council (enforcing compliance is another matter altogether: despite past UN resolutions banning luxury items, there appears to be no shortage on fine cognac and fancy electronics in Pyongyang). After the second nuclear test, China and Russia may be more willing to vote for additional UN sanctions, but questions remain over how vigorously they would actually implement them. The US and Japan could unilaterally adopt additional commercial and other trade sanctions. But the reality is that these countries' leverage is limited due to their relative lack of interaction with the North.

Secondly, Pyongyang may be forgiven for questioning whether it will ever be subject to sustainable and truly punitive sanctions, no matter how appallingly it behaves. Before its 2006 missile tests and nuclear detonation, for example, the US, China and others warned it repeatedly that such action would be 'unacceptable', only later to have such behaviour accepted. When the Bush Administration froze over US$40 million (purportedly acquired through illicit transactions) in North Korean accounts at the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA), Pyongyang boycotted the Six-Party Talks. To get the North to return, the US not only had to release the funds, but also had to undergo the further indignity of 'laundering' the money through the Federal Reserve Bank of New York so that the North could deposit the funds in other financial institutions. Moreover, North Korea was allegedly the main contractor for Syria's covert nuclear reactor that Israel destroyed in September 2007, thereby sidling up very close to (if not crossing) the 'red line' of exporting its nuclear expertise or fissile materials to others. Yet no action was taken against the North. Predictably, tolerating –or worse, rewarding– North Korea's misbehaviour has only encouraged more misbehaviour. This same cycle of warning and inaction now appears to be playing out again in response to North Korea's latest provocations.

Third, South Korea has in the past exhibited concern that eliminating all of its ties to North Korea would allow China to gain influence with Pyongyang at its expense. This reflects a subtle competition between Seoul and Beijing that echoes the bitter rivalries of the 18th and 19th centuries for mastery of the Korean peninsula. Each wants to ensure that it is well-placed to shape the future of northern Korea. This limits the extent to which South Korea will abandon all relations with the North, even under the more conservative Lee Myung-bak Administration.

And fourth, and most importantly, China has so far been reluctant to pressure North Korea to the point where it risks regime collapse. Its calculus to date has preferred a North Korea with a residual nuclear weapons capability (and which is not trumpeted publicly) to the chaos of regime failure, with the risk of millions of Korean refugees pouring over the Yalu River into north-eastern China. For a country intent on securing its 'peaceful rise', and beset by a host of internal problems ranging from environmental degradation, endemic corruption, rising unemployment, uneven economic development between the coastal areas and the hinterland, an inadequate health care system and a serious demographic imbalance between males and females, China's leaders could be forgiven for not wanting the additional burden of a massive refugee crisis and a failed state on its border. In short, the Chinese have a view towards Korea that is similar to that of France towards Germany during the Cold War –'We like Germany so much', Paris declared, 'that we're glad there are two of them'–.

Since the 25 May test, however, an increasing number of Chinese voices have called for a reassessment of this calculus. If Beijing decided to squeeze the North, it certainly has

the ability to do so –reportedly 80% of the North's energy and fuel is supplied by China, often at discounted or subsidised rates–. At this stage, it remains to be seen whether China will deliberately try to topple the Kim Jong-il regime. Based on its past performance, it is doubtful that Beijing would do so.

Enhancing Security and Stability in North-East Asia
With a Pyongyang seemingly resolute in its desire for nuclear weapons status, with economic and coercive measures not viable or effective and with military options off the table, there are no good options for reversing North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, de-nuclearising the Korean peninsula and integrating a non-nuclear North Korea into the North-East Asian community. This had been the goal for the past two decades, since the end of the Cold War. The means for realising this goal were either bilateral or multilateral negotiations. Regrettably, this pathway is no longer possible.

Instead, it is important to recognise that we are now operating within a new security environment that requires a new security paradigm. What would it look like?

First, it means above all that the previous emphasis on diplomacy must end; the time for a diplomatic solution to the challenges posed by North Korea has passed. Instead, the US and the other members of the Six-Party Talks need to enhance their ability to deter and contain North Korea until there comes a time when a new regime in Pyongyang wants to craft a different relationship with the outside world. Although it may still be possible for the US to bribe the North back to the negotiating table (as has been done before), this would be confusing process for substance. As stated earlier, the goal of the Six-Party Talks is ***not*** to get to the North Koreans to the bargaining table. It is for the North Koreans to want to come to the table to investigate whether it makes sense for them to abandon their nuclear weapons programmes and forge a fundamentally new relationship with the US and the region. The US and the other Six-Party Talks members cannot make this calculation for Pyongyang and they should stop trying to do so. They should try to be at least as patient as the North Koreans have proved to be.

The difficulty for the US and others of making this conceptual change from engagement to deterrence and containment should not be underestimated. Entire bureaucracies and professional careers across a half-dozen chancelleries and foreign ministries have been invested in engaging the North over the past two decades; they will resist strongly a shift to this new security paradigm.

The Obama Administration needs to take three immediate steps. First, it should announce publicly its new policy towards North Korea, to ensure that there is no misunderstanding about its intentions inside its own Administration, in the North and among America's friends and allies in the region. This is a time for firmness and clarity, not for wishful thinking that North Korea is not a nuclear weapons state and that it can somehow be seduced back to the negotiating table. Other potential proliferators, especially Iran, are watching the North Korea case closely and drawing their own conclusions about the costs and benefits of acquiring nuclear weapons.

Secondly, the US needs to repair relations with its two major allies in Asia, Japan and South Korea. Both relationships have been bruised in recent years and Seoul and Tokyo are anxious about whether the new team in Washington will fully consult and coordinate on its North Korea policy (there have been complaints about the Obama team's relative lack of focus on Asia even before the present crisis). In this sense, the North Korean

nuclear issue is not about North Korea at all. It is about the US preserving alliance relations. After all, Washington cannot control what the North does, but it can control what it does in relation to Seoul and Tokyo. A good place to start is with the US-ROK summit planned for 16 June, when President Lee Myung-bak will visit the White House. At that time, the US ought to offer South Korea a formal, written security guarantee. The Administration should offer to do the same for Japan, if Tokyo wishes.

Third, the US has welcomed South Korea's joining the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) after the 25 May test and it needs to encourage China to do so as well (Russia is already a PSI member). These actions should be part of a clear and unequivocal message sent to Pyongyang that the international community will not tolerate the North's export of ***any*** nuclear technology or ballistic missiles. Why Pyongyang reacted so vehemently against Seoul's signing up for PSI is likely due to its concern that this might help choke off a much-needed source of hard currency to the regime. Chinese participation would further tighten the cordon around the North. If Beijing feels that it cannot align itself so publicly against North Korea, then the means for China's covert cooperation should be developed and institutionalised.

Conclusion: Over the past two decades, North Korea has gradually but inexorably advanced its strategic position without paying any significant price. The strategic positions of the other parties in the region, on the other hand, have declined. None is safer or better off today than it was a few years ago.

This decline cannot be immediately reversed. But recognition of the need for a new security paradigm is the beginning of wisdom. Coupled with the modest steps outlined above, this would form a new policy towards North Korea of what might be termed 'malign neglect'. This policy would have the merit of placing the burden for real progress in any future negotiations where they should be –on North Korea, on playing to US strengths in its alliance relations in the region and on aligning US non-proliferation interests for the Korean peninsula with those of the international community–.

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