



Responding to Kim's Latest Provocation



North Korea's May 25 nuclear test have pushed the rogue regime back to the top of the global agenda. Charles Armstrong and Don Kirk look at how Washington and Seoul can respond.

A Realist Approach to North Korea

by *Charles K. Armstrong*

ON MAY 22, the Film Forum in New York screened a newly restored print of Stanley Kubrick's 1964 Cold War classic, "Dr. Strangelove, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb." This black comedy of nuclear madness and apocalyptic obsession seemed perfectly timed for North Korea's second nuclear test just three days later. In particular the image of wild-eyed foreign policy advisor Dr. Strangelove, one of several characters played by Peter Sellers in the movie, could almost be a stand-in for Kim Jong Il, whom the media never tires of calling "unpredictable" and a "madman." Supposedly, however, Kubrick based Dr. Strangelove, Teutonic accent and all, on Henry Kissinger.

Some time ago a high-ranking North

Korean Foreign Ministry official met with the real Dr. Kissinger in New York for an off-the-record discussion of foreign policy matters. According to eyewitness accounts, the official suggested that, despite the current hostility between North Korea and the U.S., the two countries had a common interest in preventing the rise of a new hegemonic power in Asia, i.e. China. Therefore, based on a Kissingerian principle of *realpolitik*, wouldn't it be logical for Pyongyang and Washington to put aside their differences and form an alliance against an emerging Chinese domination of the region? Kissinger reportedly remarked that this was an interesting idea, but remained non-committal.

North Korea's nuclear test and missile launches of recent weeks have taken much of the world by surprise, creating fear, consternation and bewilderment from Seoul to Tokyo to Washington. Once again, Pyongyang has gone off the rails and recklessly

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endangered its neighbors, the international order and its own security. Once again, it seems, Kim Jong Il has acted like the mad Dr. Strangelove, this time (as with the first nuclear test of October 2006), not just with missiles but with nuclear weapons.

In fact, North Korea may be less like Dr. Strangelove and more like Dr. Kissinger: “realistic” to a fault, seeing the world purely in terms of power politics. Like Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, whom Mr. Kim’s father Kim Il Sung greatly admired but whose hyper-realism invited both the Nazi invasion in 1942 (surely Hitler didn’t believe his own ideology?) and a proxy war with the U.S. in Korea in 1950 (surely South Korea wasn’t worth America defending?), Kim Jong Il may be too much of a realist for his own good.

Common stereotypes to the contrary, Mr. Kim and his country are not mad; their behavior follows a rather consistent if idiosyncratic logic. Only by trying to comprehend the North Korean view of its security interests, and how Pyongyang’s recent actions follow from that view, can we understand how we got to this dangerous point, pull back from the precipice and restore some semblance of peace on the Korean peninsula. This will not be easy, given the almost universal approbation North Korea’s recent actions have invited, but the stakes have never been higher.

Many commentators have linked North Korea’s latest nuclear saber-rattling to an alleged succession crisis within the Kim regime. Mr. Kim’s apparent stroke last year, which caused him to disappear from public view for some months, and his appearance of frail health since his re-emergence, underscores the need to establish a successor before he passes from the scene.

There is some evidence that he is preparing his youngest son Kim Jong-un to replace him, possibly with brother-in-law Jang Song-taek as regent. According to this interpretation, North Korea’s nuclear

test, missile launches and increasingly bellicose rhetoric are signs that Kim is trying to prove his toughness to the military, or that the military is now in charge, or that various individuals and factions within the leadership are engaging in militaristic one-upsmanship.

What we do know from past experience is that North Korea has engaged in this kind of brinkmanship in order to push forward its agenda with the U.S. And, unfortunately, this tactic has worked: The stalled Agreed Framework talks begun in 1994 got a boost after North Korea fired its Taepodong rocket in 1998; the six-party talks begun in 2003 reached a more substantive agreement after the missile and nuclear tests of 2006.

The latest belligerence follows another breakdown of the denuclearization talks at the end of 2008. The Obama administration had essentially ignored North Korea since coming to office. Now Pyongyang has its attention.

What does North Korea want? Perhaps it wants to be internationally accepted as a de facto nuclear power, like Pakistan or Israel. With little else to boast about, economically weak and politically isolated North Korea can at least claim membership of the select club of nuclear-weapons states, which has the benefit of deterring any potential attack on its sovereignty. Fundamentally the North Korean regime wants to be assured of its own survival, to be relieved of the threat posed to its political system by hostile outside forces, the United States above all.

Pyongyang might have achieved this security through a peace agreement with the U.S. to replace the Korean War armistice, an explicit aim of the six-party agreement of September 2005. Pyongyang still says such an agreement is its goal. But the North Korean leadership seems to have reasoned that a quicker and more certain means to security is a nuclear deterrent.

This is one clear (if unintended) lesson of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003: Lack of a robust and explicit nuclear deterrent leaves one vulnerable to American attack. At this point it will be very difficult to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons and return to peace talks. But it is not impossible, and a negotiated solution is still better than the alternatives.

It is often said that diplomatic agreements with North Korea are meaningless because Pyongyang always reneges. But nuclear talks with Pyongyang have had some success in the past. For more than eight years, from October 1994 until the Agreed Framework broke down in 2003, North Korea froze its nuclear reprocessing activities and sealed its plutonium fuel rods.

Again, after the six-party agreements of 2005 and 2007, North Korea stopped reprocessing nuclear fuel, released an unprecedented amount of information about its nuclear program to the U.S., and began dismantling its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon. But by autumn 2008, disagreements over verification procedures and timing led to a breakdown in the six-party talks, and by the end of the year North Korea had kicked out U.N. inspectors and threatened to restart its nuclear reactor.

As in previous crises, there are three broad approaches available to the U.S. today: a military response, economic sanctions and negotiations. A military response is simply not on the table, and to its credit the Obama administration has not suggested that it is. Even before North Korea possessed nuclear weapons, attacking that country would have precipitated a catastrophe for the Northeast Asian region. Now

the consequences would be even worse.

Sanctions and pressure have never succeeded in getting Pyongyang to change its ways, and even if China and Russia agree to implement new U.N. sanctions it is far from certain that they will work this time. This leaves, once again, returning to negotiations both bilaterally between Pyongyang and Washington, and multilaterally through the six-party talks.

The goal of these talks must go beyond the elimination of Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal. We may already be past the point of North Korea giving up its nuclear deterrent, and for the time being will have to live

with a nuclear North Korea. But ultimately, viewing North Korea purely through the lens of nuclear non-proliferation is a mistake. North Korea's belligerence, including its nuclear weapons program, is the result of its ongoing

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conflict with the U.S., not the cause. Therefore the goal of dealing with Pyongyang should be to eliminate the root cause of the current crisis: the state of war.

After almost 60 years the Korean War must end, and the goal of new talks should be to transform the current armistice swiftly and decisively into a new peace agreement. Diplomatic normalization between Washington and Pyongyang (as well as Tokyo and Pyongyang) would establish the channels by which other issues, including North Korea's denuclearization, could be negotiated and achieved.

Dr. Kissinger suggested such a normalization formula more than 30 years ago. Like the Clinton and Bush administrations, President Obama must rely on diplomacy, not threats and pressure, to change North Korea's behavior. That is true realism. ■