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Solving the Korean Stalemate, One Step at a Time

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IN 1994 the North Koreans expelled inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency and were threatening to process spent nuclear fuel into plutonium, giving them the ability to produce nuclear weapons.

With the risk of war on the Korean Peninsula, there was a consensus that the forces of South Korea and the United States could overwhelmingly defeat North Korea. But it was also known that North Korea could quickly launch more than 20,000 shells and missiles into nearby Seoul. The American commander in South Korea, Gen. Gary Luck, estimated that total casualties would far exceed those of the Korean War.

Responding to an invitation from President Kim Il-sung of North Korea, and with the approval of President Bill Clinton, I went to Pyongyang and negotiated an agreement under which North Korea would cease its nuclear program at Yongbyon and permit inspectors from the atomic agency to return to the site to assure that the spent fuel was not reprocessed. It was also agreed that direct talks would be held between the two Koreas.

The spent fuel (estimated to be adequate for a half-dozen bombs) continued to be monitored, and extensive bilateral discussions were held. The United States assured the North Koreans that there would be no military threat to them, that it would supply fuel oil to replace the lost nuclear power and that it would help build two modern atomic power plants, with their fuel rods and operation to be monitored by international inspectors. The summit talks resulted in South Korean President Kim Dae-jung earning the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize for his successful efforts to ease tensions on the peninsula.

But beginning in 2002, the United States branded North Korea as part of an axis of evil, threatened military action, ended the shipments of fuel oil and the construction of nuclear power plants and refused to consider further bilateral talks. In their discussions with me at this time, North Korean spokesmen seemed convinced that the American positions posed a serious danger to their country and to its political regime.

Responding in its ill-advised but predictable way, Pyongyang withdrew from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, expelled atomic energy agency inspectors, resumed processing fuel rods and began developing nuclear explosive devices.

Six-nation talks finally concluded in an agreement last September that called for North Korea to abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and for the United States and North Korea to respect each other's sovereignty, exist peacefully together and take steps to normalize relations. Each side subsequently claimed that the other had violated the agreement. The United States imposed severe financial sanctions and Pyongyang adopted the deeply troubling nuclear option.

The current military situation is similar but worse than it was a decade ago: we can still destroy North Korea's army, but if we do it is likely to result in many more than a million South Korean and American casualties.

If and when it is confirmed that the recent explosion in North Korea was nuclear, the international community will once again be faced with difficult choices.

One option, the most likely one, is to try to force Pyongyang's leaders to abandon their nuclear program with military threats and a further tightening of the embargoes, increasing the suffering of its already starving people.

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Two important facts must be faced: Kim Jong-il and his military leaders have proven themselves almost impervious to outside pressure, and both China and South Korea have shown that they are reluctant to destabilize the regime. This approach is also more likely to stimulate further nuclear weapons activity.

The other option is to make an effort to put into effect the September denuclearization agreement, which the North Koreans still maintain is feasible. The simple framework for a step-by-step agreement exists, with the United States giving a firm and direct statement of no hostile intent, and moving toward normal relations if North Korea forgoes any further nuclear weapons program and remains at peace with its neighbors. Each element would have to be confirmed by mutual actions combined with unimpeded international inspections.

Although a small nuclear test is a far cry from even a crude deliverable bomb, this second option has become even more difficult now, but it is unlikely that the North Koreans will back down unless the United States meets this basic demand. Washington's pledge of no direct talks could be finessed through secret discussions with a trusted emissary like former Secretary of State Jim Baker, who earlier this week said, "It's not appeasement to talk to your enemies."

What must be avoided is to leave a beleaguered nuclear nation convinced that it is permanently excluded from the international community, its existence threatened, its people suffering horrible deprivation and its hard-liners in total control of military and political policy.

PS:

Jimmy Carter, the 39th president, is the founder of the Carter Center and the winner of the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize.

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