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KOREA AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS: A BACKGROUND PAPER ON EASING TENSIONS ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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It should have been a warning! When the Pentagon's two-war scenario leaked to the public in early 1992 we should have known that North Korea now topped the enemies list. Now North Korea seems to be an aggressive nuclear proliferator, but do we know all the facts?

The Korean war was a major war with more bombs dropped than all the conventional bombing of Japan during World War II. Three to six civilians died for every combatant killed. South Korea's Red Cross shows almost a quarter million dead, a similar number wounded and 303,213 missing. US nuclear weapons were deployed in the South. The armistice signed on 27 July 1953 was not a peace treaty. Technically the war still rages.

Honing the Nuclear Edge.

Belligerence has since prevailed on both sides. Each year the US and South Korea carry out joint "Team Spirit" exercises -- the largest military maneuvers worldwide which practice everything from beachheads to nuclear strikes on North Korea. North Korea responds by deploying invasion forces along the de-militarized zone. This is then used by US and South Korean officials to justify continued maneuvers, and so the spiral goes.

North Korea started operating a Soviet-supplied research reactor in 1968. Transition to a military program probably took place in the late 1970s. Since 1980, US spy planes have been monitoring the construction of an unusually large complex near Yongbyon, about 60 miles north of Pyongyang, which was completed in 1987. It comprises some 100 buildings containing a fuel reprocessing plant and two reactors -- the 5-megawatt research reactor and a 200-megawatt reactor. During the late 1980s US intelligence predicted the 200-megawatt reactor would begin operation in late 1992 and produce enough plutonium to construct seven bombs a year. The reprocessing plant would be in operation shortly thereafter, and North Korea could have its first nuclear bomb by 1994.

When 1994 arrived, US Defense Secretary William Perry said the second reactor would be completed "in a few years" and could produce material for 10-12 bombs a year.¹

¹SJMN, 8 June 1994, p. 9A.

North Korea became party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985, possibly to make it easier to obtain nuclear materials and technology. But it did not fulfill its obligation to sign a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA -- a United Nations Agency) within 18 months, possibly to hide construction of its Yongbyon complex.

Hope in the 1990s.

During the 1980s there had been no indication that North Korea intended to invade the South. On 13 December 1991 the two Koreas signed a non-aggression and reconciliation agreement to "not interfere in the internal affairs of the other" and "refrain from all acts aimed at destroying and overthrowing the other side." Both agreed to "discontinue confrontation and competition" and to cooperate in "joint development of resources," permit "free travel and contacts between citizens" and to "connect several railways and roads."²

The pact called for de-nuclearizing the Korean Peninsula and the US removed its nuclear weapons in late 1991. "Team Spirit 1992" was suspended. North Korea completed its obligation to the NPT by signing the nuclear safeguard accords permitting IAEA inspections of nuclear facilities. In the eight months between 11 May 1992 and 26 January 1993, the IAEA made six inspection team visits to North Korea. That was the hopeful situation at the beginning of 1993. But it was not to last.

And Then Despair.

In December 1991, the same month that the non-aggression pact was signed, a Pentagon study was released which led to a US policy emphasizing regional wars, and Korea was suggested as a potential future battleground. Perhaps the move toward reconciliation between the Koreas did not suit US purposes. Whatever the reason, conjuring up another enemy image served the goals of nuclear and military proponents.

Early 1993 media reports, inspired by newly-appointed CIA director R. James Woolsey, alleged that North Korea was secretly developing nuclear weapons. Apparently there were some inconsistencies in the quantity and quality of nuclear material between what North Korea declared and what the IAEA found. During its 25 February 1993 meeting the IAEA board, hoping to resolve the inconsistencies, passed a US-sponsored resolution calling for inspection of two nuclear waste sites which had not been declared. North Korea claimed these were secret military facilities with no connection to its nuclear program. The impasse was on and "Team Spirit 1993" took place in March, using an extra 19,000 US troops and the aircraft carrier USS Independence.

On 8 March 1993 North Korea reacted by putting all its armed forces on war alert, and on March 12th gave the required three-months notice that it would withdraw from the NPT. The North Korean statement said: "Some officials of the IAEA secretariat insist stubbornly on the 'inspection' of our military bases as dictated by the United States, while ignoring our demand for inspection of the nuclear weapons and nuclear bases of the United States in South Korea."³ The IAEA Board of

²Swomley, p. 24.

³Swomley, p. 25.

Governors reported North Korea's non-compliance to the UN Security Council. On 11 May 1993 the Security Council passed a resolution, with China and Pakistan abstaining, calling upon North Korea to comply with IAEA safeguard agreements.

A successful test of its Nodong-1 intermediate-range missile apparently gave North Korea enough prestige to announce on 11 June 1993 that it would stay on as a party to the NPT, at least for now. The remainder of 1993 saw a heated exchange of rhetoric and diplomatic bluffs over North Korea's stance on inspections. A December 1993 Los Angeles Times poll indicated that 51 percent of Americans favored "using American military force to eliminate ... suspected North Korean nuclear weapons installations" if negotiations to allow inspections fails.⁴

Skewed Facts in 1994.

When international pressure was getting heavy on North Korea during mid-February 1994, it agreed to resume IAEA inspections at the seven declared sites. But it still would not allow inspection of the two disputed waste dumps. When IAEA inspectors wanted to take a closer look at a plutonium-processing area during mid-March, inspections were again called off. That was followed by another threat to pull out of the NPT. A suspended "Team Spirit 1994" exercise then took place.

In mid-April 1994, North Korea shut down its 5-megawatt research reactor at Yongbyon and started unloading fuel. IAEA observers were allowed strict observance of fuel rod removal and storage in cooling ponds, but could not take samples for testing. The cry then went up that the purity of plutonium removed could not be measured. Actually, IAEA inspectors were monitoring the defueling and had surveillance cameras. Although they couldn't take samples to test purity, the Washington-based Arms Control Agency refutes the claim that desired information is irretrievably lost. It's senior analyst, Jon Wolfsthal, expressed "concerns that the IAEA may have been overlooking, or may have wrongly rejected, possible solutions to this problem.... It is unclear...why it wouldn't be possible at a later date to randomly sample fuel to determine the average age and burn-up rate." [Defense News, 6 June 1994, p. 6] Regarding using the spent fuel for nuclear weapons, US Defense Secretary Perry says the IAEA assured him it "is confident that there has been no diversion of the fuel that has been discharged." [SJMN, 21 May 1994, p. 14A]

A hot international debate then took place on whether sanctions should be imposed against North Korea or whether negotiations should continue. North Korea vociferated that sanctions would be considered an act of war, and fulminated more on pulling out of the NPT. South Koreans started stocking their larders and bracing for hostilities. Both sides amassed troops along the 38th parallel. But in spite of its hot rhetoric, North Korea did not close the door to negotiating with the US.

Negotiations Win Out.

North Korea's late President Kim Il Sung recently said he wants a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula and is willing to resume talks with the US. He said his country wants diplomatic recognition and financial help in converting its nuclear reactors to the commercial light-water type which are less adaptable to bomb making.

⁴SJMN, 10 December 1993, p. 17A.

In April 1994, North Korea's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Kim Jong Su, said that his country doesn't want nuclear weapons. What it really wants is a permanent peace treaty with the United States. Then in early May, North Korean Foreign minister Kim Yong Nam reiterated that negotiations with the US were the key to cooperation. He told IAEA Director General Hans Blix: "I would like to assure you that if the further round of [North Korean-US] talks would take place...all the routine and ad hoc inspection activities, including the selection and storage of some fuel rods as requested by your agency, would be possible."⁵ All of these things do sound like steps in the right direction.

Former US President Jimmy Carter laid groundwork for negotiations with the US and a North-South summit meeting to normalize relations, and he optimistically declared the crisis over. The Clinton administration, unable to ignore this turn of events, said negotiations could resume if North Korea freezes its nuclear program. The North agreed and talks began with the US in July 1994. Summit talks between North and South were set for late July.

Before negotiations with the US were barely underway, and two weeks before summit talks with South Korea, President Kim Il Sung died on July 8th. There was frantic speculation on whether Kim's son and chosen successor, Kim Jong Il, would be able to hold control of government, or whether there would be a takeover by military hardliners.

There were jitters along the 38th parallel for two months but North Korea continued its conciliatory attitude and by early August it appeared that Kim Jong Il was firmly in charge. In fact, according to Deputy Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju, the new leader has been overseeing every aspect of government policy for the past twenty years, and North Korea is still committed to unification of the peninsula. Negotiations with the US proceeded.

The October 1994 Agreement.

On 21 October 1994 the US and North Korea signed a nuclear accord in which each side made concessions. The US will arrange for \$4 billion in international financing to construct two 1,000-megawatt light-water reactors which are less capable of producing bomb-grade plutonium. Until the first one is operating in about 2003, North Korea does not have to start dismantling existing facilities. North Korea will, however, freeze its nuclear program, halt construction of new gas-graphite nuclear reactors, and cease reprocessing the spent fuel rods removed from its research reactor.

In the meantime the US is to arrange an interim supply of 500,000 metric tons of fuel oil annually until the new reactors are constructed. North Korea agreed to remain in the NPT and to allow IAEA inspections, but the US agreed that inspections of the two disputed waste dumps do not have to take place for about five years. North Korea will renew diplomatic relations with South Korea and the US will establish a liaison office in Pyongyang which could eventually be upgraded to ambassadorial status, and will gradually ease trade and investment restrictions. Team Spirit 1994 was canceled but plans to bolster the 37,000 US troops in South Korea will continue until the North reduces forces along the 38th parallel.

⁵*Defense News*, 9 May 1994, p. 3.

Perhaps Our Last Chance.

The nuclear accord with North Korea is encouraging, but we cannot relax our pressure or there may be no follow through. It had no sooner been signed than there was criticism. Some say the US has given away too much and "experts" are conjuring up fears that North Korea "could" field a nuclear bomb in 1995 while providing only vague implications that it is attempting to do so. The Clinton administration is under fire for not getting commitments from Japan and South Korea to help pay for the new reactors.

When military planners used a combination of other exercises (Ulchi Focus Lens, Freedom Banner, Full Eagle, ADX-85, and numerous other smaller military maneuvers) to accomplish what the canceled Team Spirit 1994 would have done, North Korea in February and March 1995 conducted its largest winter exercise in several years. The cry of critics then went up that the infusion of fuel oil allowed this to happen.

As in the past, attempts are being made to conjure up another crisis that will nullify all that has been accomplished so far. All people who aspire to peace on the Korean Peninsula must continue to press the US toward what could be our last chance for a meaningful end to the Korean war. We Americans would do well to shed the "unconditional surrender" syndrome of the 1940s -- and the "worst-case scenario" planning of the Cold War. Rather than dictate our terms with an or-else attitude, it would be prudent that we recognize North Korea's legitimate complaints. If we proceed with the notion that we must bring North Korea to its knees, we will lose this vital opportunity. Such a loss could very well mean sending more sons to the Asian killing fields. Retired Admiral Ronald J. Hays, former Commander-in-Chief of US Pacific Forces, warned last December that threats, trade sanctions and isolation are not the answer. "This view underestimates the toughness and determination of the Korean people when faced with adversity," he said, and the best approach is to offer "increased contacts, expanded dialogue, reduce the embargo, support the North's objective of establishing free economic and trade zones, and grant diplomatic recognition." The only alternative, warned the admiral, is "a military ultimatum...but only if we are prepared for a second war on the Korean Peninsula."⁶

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⁶*Honolulu Star Bulletin*; cited in Swomley, p. 25.

References

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