Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing No. 14: Defusing the Korean Bomb

December 16, 1991

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Executive Summary

Iraq is not the only aggressive regional power seeking to develop an atomic bomb. North Korea, the secretive Hermit Kingdom ruled by "great leader" Kim Il Sung, has an extensive nuclear research program but so far refuses to allow international inspection of its facilities. The United States needs to work to defuse the North Korean bomb before it is built, lest Pyongyang destabilize the entire East Asian region.

Regional Hot Spot

The Korean peninsula hosts one of the few remaining Cold War confrontations in the world. In 1950 the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), led by Kim, invaded the South. Eventually, both the United States and China were drawn into the conflict. After three years of war an armistice was arranged, but no permanent peace treaty was ever signed.

Although the last Chinese troops left the DPRK in 1958, some 39,000 American soldiers, down from 43,000 in 1990, remain in the Republic of Korea (ROK) to this day. All told, more than 1.5 million soldiers face each other across the short, 155-mile border--almost as many as along the entire 4,600-mile Soviet-Chinese border. Since 1953 more than 1,000 South Koreans and 90 Americans have died in clashes with North Korean troops along the misnamed Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

A major military build-up in the 1970s gave a clear quantitative edge to the DPRK, but the ROK has been outspending the North for a decade. The Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, for instance, conservatively estimates that South Korean defense outlays began to surpass those of the North in 1982; from 1982 through 1988 the ROK outspent Pyongyang $43.9 billion to $40.3 billion (in 1988 dollars).[1] Other organizations figure the gap to be far greater and still growing. The International Institute for Strategic Studies, for one, has estimated that Seoul outspent North Korea $9.8 billion to $4.1 billion in 1990.[2]

Although Seoul lags in overall equipment and manpower, it has more advanced weapons, better trained active duty forces, larger reserves, the advantage of defense-friendly terrain, and a far stronger economic infrastructure. A 1985 Rand Corporation study concluded: "South Korea's economic, technological, and military capabilities can be expected to grow substantially relative to those of North Korea during the next decade. The resulting balance should increasingly and predominantly favor the South."[3] That study's conclusions have clearly been borne out. The ROK's GNP outstrips that of the North by 11 to 1; South Korea competes globally in the auto, construction, and electronics markets while the DPRK has defaulted on much of its international debt; and important foreign diplomatic delegations travel to Seoul, not Pyongyang.

The Nuclear Counterweight

Even Kim Il Sung has apparently recognized that North Korea is falling far behind the ROK in both the economic competition and the conventional arms race. He has reacted in somewhat contradictory ways. Under pressure from Beijing and Moscow, he opened official talks with Seoul in the fall of 1990 and accepted UN membership for both Korean states-- something Pyongyang had always opposed. At the same time, however, Kim was pursuing a nuclear weapons program to offset the South's growing economic and military power.

Satellite photos reveal an extensive nuclear center at Yongbyon, 60 miles north of Pyongyang. The facilities appear to include a reactor and a reprocessing site. Some observers fear that the DPRK may also have underground operations; author Joseph Bermudez warns, "The problem is that you can't tell what's inside the buildings and what's underground."[4] In September 1991 Ko Young Hwan, a North Korean defector, claimed that the DPRK has an entire facility below ground at Bakchon, also near Pyongyang.[5]

North Korea denies that it is working on a nuclear weapon, and observers disagree on how close Pyongyang is to creating one--several years is the most common estimate, but some analysts fear that the DPRK might be ready to produce weapons-grade plutonium in as little as a year and a crude bomb a year or two later. In any case, understanding why North Korea is trying to build a nuclear weapon might help us better forestall its creation.

The original objective of the North's atomic project may have been honestly defensive: Pyongyang is steadily losing its military edge and feels itself at a particular disadvantage, given the presence of tactical American nuclear weapons in South Korea (now scheduled to be withdrawn). Although we understandably view North Korean fears as paranoid, they are not completely irrational. Before the Korean War, ROK president Syngman Rhee threatened to march north to recover what he called the "lost territories"; former president Chun Doo Hwan considered a military strike on the DPRK in retaliation for the North Korean bomb attack on him and his cabinet in Rangoon in 1983. Indeed, some opponents of an American military withdrawal are privately uneasy about the possibility of South Korean aggression in the absence of Washington's restraining hand. Pyongyang's worries have been exacerbated by the defection of its ally, the USSR, as well as China's steadily warming relationship with the South. In short, in the DPRK's view, there is little to prevent an invasion backed by U.S. nuclear weapons other than continuing American restraint.

North Korea's primary goal today is probably political. The North seems to realize that it is engaged in a race that it cannot win, that it is lagging ever further behind South Korea economically and technologically. Seoul is also out-stripping North Korea diplomatically and gaining new friends, such as Moscow, at Pyongyang's expense. Acquisition of the bomb, however, would turn North Korea into an international player that could not be scorned. Observes defector Ko, the DPRK's attitude toward the South is, "No matter what you have now and how well you live, we have the weapons."[6] And a nuclear weapon, he adds, is viewed by DPRK officials "as the last means they can resort to to protect their system."[7]

The North's nuclear weapons project also has domestic implications. The succession of Kim's chosen heir, his son Kim Jong Il, is by no means guaranteed. The younger Kim's position may be secure only as long as the elder Kim lives. The potential propaganda bonanza that would result from the acquisition of an atomic bomb might be viewed as a necessary boost for the junior Kim, who at present has few accomplishments to his name.

A Nuclearized North Korea?

The prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea is not pleasant. Kim Il Sung launched the Korean War, which resulted in 1 million Korean deaths, some four decades ago. Even if he did not start a new conflict, he could use an atomic bomb to pressure South Korea and possibly Japan. Such an effort at political blackmail could spark an unsettling regional nuclear arms race.

Pyongyang signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985 but has so far refused to approve an inspection agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). (Negotiation of such agreements normally takes about 18 months.) Until now North Korea has based its refusal to negotiate on the presence of American tactical nuclear weapons in the South.[8] Explained Foreign Minister Kim Yong Nam in early October 1991, inspections would be allowed "if such a nuclear threat [from the United States] is removed."[9] The Bush administration's decision to withdraw U.S. tactical nuclear weapons eliminates the North's public justification for refusing to comply with the NPT.

And the initial North Korean response to Washington's announcement was positive. Foreign Minister Kim said that "if the [Bush] plan is implemented, the broad channel will be open" for concluding the IAEA safeguards agreement.[10] Similarly, the Foreign Ministry responded by stating that "if the United States really withdraws its nuclear weapons from South Korea, the way of our signing the nuclear safeguards accord will be opened."[11]

However, Pyongyang soon backtracked, issuing new conditions for accepting inspections. At the fourth round of talks between the South and North Korean prime ministers, Pyongyang demanded that the ROK renounce the nuclear protection of the United States and forbid the overflight of aircraft and visitation by ships carrying nuclear weapons. In early November 1991 South Korean president Roh Tae Woo responded by promising to eschew nuclear weapons and nuclear processing and enrichment facilities and to accept continued international inspections. He called on the North to do likewise.

A week later Pyongyang offered, through a visiting American, William Taylor of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, to accept UN inspections if the United States agreed to IAEA visits to ensure that all of America's nuclear weapons had been withdrawn from the ROK. Said Taylor, the North Koreans stated that "this is free and separate from surrounding issues," including the demand that Seoul renounce America's nuclear protection.[12] Later in the month the DPRK mission to the United Nations quoted a Foreign Ministry spokesman:

If the United States, he went on, truly intend to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula, there will arise no problem, provided that it withdraw its nuclear weapons from south Korea, remove the nuclear threat to us and then proceed to verify it through a simultaneous inspection of the north and the south as we have already proposed, instead of resorting to pressure on us. This is a most realistic and reasonable solution to it, and there can be no other condition, he declared.[13]

The Foreign Ministry later issued an official statement acknowledging "some common points" with President Roh's proposal and indicating a willingness to accept international inspection once Washington's weapons were withdrawn if the United States negotiated directly with Pyongyang, accepted IAEA scrutiny of American facilities, and worked with the ROK to make Korea a nuclear-free zone.[14] Pentagon officials indicate that they might be willing to accept Pyongyang's demand for reciprocal inspections, an unprecedented, but not unreasonable, proposal.[15]

Some observers are predicting that Pyongyang will sign the IAEA safeguards agreement at the next board meeting in February 1992 while continuing to resist actual inspections. If the DPRK remains recalcitrant, the world's last cold war could heat up. Roh calls the prospect of a North Korean bomb "dangerous and destabilizing."[16] Such a step, he says, "could in an instant shatter the peace in Northeast Asia and the world."[17] On October 30, 1991, the ROK Defense Ministry released a white paper that stated ominously that the DPRK effort "must be stopped at any cost."[18] Measures to stop that effort might include a preemptive air or commando strike to destroy the North's facilities, ROK Defense Minister Lee Jong Koo suggested on two occasions. (Lee has since moderated his tone, stating that "military and other sanctions against the North might be made by the United Nations, but we cannot go so far as to run the risk of another Korean War.")[19]

Some Americans also support the "Israeli solution," named after the strike on Iraq's Osirik reactor in 1981. Says Chicago Tribune columnist Stephen Chapman, "An air attack on the nuclear complex at Yongbyon would shut down North Korea's program by destroying its reactors and the reprocessing plan needed to produce fuel for bombs--just as Israel's attack delayed Iraq's nuclear plans by at least ten years."[20] Other options, discussed at the annual U.S.-South Korean security talks in November, include economic sanctions and a naval blockade.

Lee and Chapman may be overly sanguine about the efficacy of a military strike if the DPRK does indeed have a second, underground nuclear site. Moreover, such an attack could goad Pyongyang, long considered one of the least predictable and most threatening regimes on earth, into attacking the ROK. In fact, North Korean officials have responded sharply to the South's military threats; Prime Minister Yon Hyung Muk warned that "these words reflect the very dangerous attitudes present in the South, and they could drive the Korean Peninsula into a state of war."[21]

Chapman downplays the risk of military retaliation by North Korea: "One fear is the North would respond by attacking the South. But the regime will almost certainly be deterred, as it has been before, by the knowledge that it would be defeated and probably toppled in such a war. More likely, Kim will do what Saddam Hussein did after the Israeli raid--

nothing."[22] But Iraq had no effective means of striking Israel, and Israel has nuclear weapons, which would have made all-out Iraqi aggression suicidal.[23] Even if Pyongyang failed to initiate general hostilities, it could attack ROK cities--and nuclear power plants--with its supply of Scud missiles. And it would almost certainly reinvigo- rate its terror campaign that seems to have been relatively dormant since 1987.

Of course, South Korean officials might feel the risk worth taking, but Americans, too, would be endangered. If Pyongyang launched its tanks in response to a raid, U.S. soldiers along the DMZ would die, thus triggering the human trip-wire and automatically drawing Washington into a second Korean war. Moreover, terrorism would not be likely to stop at the ROK's borders.

An alternative to the risky Israeli option would be a permanent U.S. nuclear guarantee for the ROK, and probably for Japan and Taiwan as well.[24] But such a guarantee would extend the already dubious doctrine of extended deterrence-- jeopardizing American cities to prevent a Soviet attack on major allied nations--into dangerous and uncharted waters. The Soviet Union's communist leadership, for all its brutality, was always rational and calculating, not reckless. Washington would now be risking nuclear combat with potentially unstable and unpredictable regional powers, rather than with the USSR, and it would be assuming that risk to protect otherwise self-sufficient states. At a time when the United States can and should discard outdated military commitments, keeping the nuclear umbrella open would ensure continued American entanglement in otherwise avoidable regional conflicts.

However, South Korea understandably would not be will- ing to sit atomically naked if the North possessed the bomb. Thus, it would undoubtedly revive its nuclear weapons program, discontinued in the mid-1970s under extreme U.S. pressure. Moreover, Japan would find it hard to continue to eschew nuclear weapons if both Koreas developed them. Relations among the three nations are difficult because of Japan's brutal colonial policies in the first half of this century. While Tokyo has little to fear from two Korean states (or even an aggressive united Korea) armed with conventional weapons, a Korean government with nuclear weapons, even if it never intended to use them, could place enormous pressure on Japan. Japanese acquisition of nuclear weapons in response would unsettle the entire region, however, and could spur other, smaller nations to try to develop their own nuclear capabilities.

Defusing the Bomb

It is therefore imperative that Washington work with Japan, South Korea, and the former USSR to induce Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons program. The United States should also attempt to enlist China, which says it desires the Koreas to remain nuclear free. Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen explains, "We do not want to see the existence of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula."[25] But Beijing is reluctant to browbeat the North, one of its few remaining ideological allies. Although it is probably prudent for Washington to limit the amount of public pressure it places on the DPRK, because such pressure could perversely make the status-conscious North Koreans more recalcitrant, private "encouragement" must be unrelenting. To increase Chinese willingness to cooperate, Washington might point to the risk of a North Korean bomb leading to a Japanese bomb, something Beijing, which has opposed virtually any Japanese rearment, surely would not welcome. The United States should also note the possible difficulty of restraining a fearful ROK leadership from launching a preemptive strike, which could humiliate the DPRK, disrupt the region's economic and political relations, and possibly reignite military conflict on the peninsula--none of which would benefit China.

Washington should take a two-track approach with Pyong- yang. First, it should emphasize the "carrot"--an opportunity to join the larger world community. For example, North Korea wants diplomatic recognition from and trade with the United States and Japan, as well as reparations from Tokyo for its colonial misrule earlier this century. So far, however, the DPRK's official contacts with America have been limited to small-scale discussions in Beijing, while the Japanese have insisted that North Korea accept nuclear inspections before any commercial or diplomatic agreement is reached. Given the apparent importance that Pyongyang places on receiving Japanese aid (in private meetings some North Korean officials have admitted to the DPRK's present economic difficulties but argued that the situation would change with an infusion of outside money), one South Korean analyst, Kim Kook Chin, goes so far as to say that "Japan is the only real option" as leverage on the DPRK.[26] Thus, the United States should point out to Pyongyang that the North is likely to fully enjoy diplomatic ties, meaningful participation in international forums, expanded trade, increased foreign investment, and other benefits only if it forgoes atomic weapons. For instance,

Japanese foreign minister Michio Watanabe has stated that Tokyo will not normalize relations with the DPRK until the latter agrees to halt its nuclear weapons program.

Moreover, Washington should indicate its readiness to phase its forces out of the South, a move that Pyongyang has persistently demanded.[27] In fact, a troop pullout is long overdue, given Seoul's ability to provide for its own defense. The ROK's advantages over North Korea are objectively overwhelming: 11 times the GNP, the fastest economic growth rate in Asia, a dramatic technological lead, unencumbered access to international credit markets, and twice the population.[28] The South is fully capable of overtaking the DPRK militarily if it chooses, and it is more likely to do so if it can no longer rely on American assistance. Indeed, the Nixon administration's limited troop withdrawals in the early 1970s spurred the higher South Korean defense outlays that are now carrying the ROK past Pyongyang militarily.

If the North really desires peace, as it claims, it could match an American withdrawal by accepting international inspection of its nuclear facilities, pulling its forces back from their advanced positions along the DMZ, and demobilizing some units. Then, no major South Korean defense hikes would be necessary. Instead, the two Koreas could negotiate a gradual reduction in both nations' forces complemented by further increases in cooperation and trade (building on the modest increases of the past year) followed perhaps by eventual reunification.

But the American troops should be withdrawn regardless of North Korea's response, given the South's evident ability to create a military capable of deterring the DPRK. The carrot for the North is that concrete actions on its part--particularly compliance with the NPT, which would demonstrate a genuine commitment to dÇtente--would both speed up the U.S. withdrawal and forestall a South Korean military buildup. Although the ultimate goal of American disengagement would not be in doubt, the timing of that disengagement would reflect conditions on the peninsula.

Second, America should brandish the "stick" of a regional nuclear arms race. If Pyongyang moves ahead and develops an atomic bomb, it will be because Kim Il Sung believes that his nation or his political dynasty, or both, will be more secure as a result. Washington might help disabuse him of that notion by warning the North that if it develops a nuclear capability, the United States will no longer discourage the South, which under American pressure dropped its atomic program in the mid-1970s, from acquiring a countervailing weapon. (Obviously, the proliferation of nuclear weapons is not desirable. But a decision by Washington to withdraw its security guarantee to the ROK, combined with continued North Korean pursuit of an atomic bomb, would place enormous pressure on Seoul to develop an independent deterrent.) Moreover, Washington would have to accept Japan's development of nuclear weapons since that country could not be expected to remain nonnuclear if it were surrounded by four neighbors that had nuclear weapons.

Of course, a number of analysts would prefer to maintain the U.S. nuclear guarantee to South Korea and Japan rather than allow them to create their own atomic bombs. Although American influence is still strong, Washington is losing its ability to dictate to its allies. In time both countries might decide that their national interests required acquisition of nuclear weapons irrespective of the U.S. guarantee, especially if they began to doubt Washington's willingness to risk nuclear retaliation and terrorism to defend distant allies. That sort of peril is a good reason for the United States to avoid entanglement in a potentially unstable area whose disputes could go nuclear. Once, a regional nuclear conflict would have become global. Because of recent changes in the international picture, however, there probably would be little threat of Soviet or Chinese retaliation against the U.S. homeland should Washington use nuclear weapons against North Korea in a future conflict. Nevertheless, such action would still entail very real risks. At the very least, it would create dangerous tensions in U.S.-Chinese relations, and it might even cause Beijing to lash out against small pro-U.S. states, particu larly Taiwan, in the region. More probably, North Korea would attempt to hit Japan or stage a terrorist attack in the United States. Although the United States is the world's dominant military power, it cannot act with impunity.

Moreover, for purposes of negotiation, the threat that Seoul and Tokyo might acquire nuclear weapons would probably have a far greater deterrent impact on the North than would the threat of a permanent extension of the American nuclear umbrella. Not only will the credibility of the U.S. commitment decline as Washington withdraws or reduces its military forces abroad, but any continuing U.S. nuclear presence, however limited, in the region would encourage Pyong-yang to create its own countervailing weapon. The DPRK needs to be convinced that acquisition of an atomic bomb would leave it less, rather than more, secure. Even Kim Il Sung can understand that there would be greater

insecurity for North Korea if both South Korea and Japan developed their own nuclear forces.

A Nuclear-Free Future for Korea?

Although some pessimistic observers assume that the North will not yield to international pressure, it would be foolish for the United States not to organize a concerted, peaceful campaign to keep Korea nuclear free. There are, in fact, reasons for cautious optimism, particularly Pyong- yang's apparent interest in ending its isolation from the rest of the world. North Korea began official talks with the South more than a year ago, and the two nations have begun direct trade and fielded joint athletic teams. The DPRK's allies, including China, have counseled moderation and refused to block South Korea's entry into the United Nations. Pyongyang is also seeking to expand its ties with some of the small nations in the region, such as the Philippines and Taiwan, as well as with Japan and the United States.

The potential North Korean atomic bomb threatens to return East Asia not just to the worst of the Cold War but to a very hot war should the ROK, with or without U.S. support, attempt a preemptive military strike against the Yongbyon and Bakchon installations. The fact that the North appears more willing than ever to negotiate makes it all the more urgent that the United States work with like-minded countries to peacefully forestall a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Notes [1] World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1989 (Washington: Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1990), p. 53.

[2] John Fialka, "North Korean Nuclear Effort Tests U.S.," Wall Street Journal, November 14, 1991, p. A10.

[3] Charles Wolf et al., The Changing Balance: South and North Korean Capabilities for Long-Term Military Competition (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1985), p. vii.

[4] Quoted in Fialka.

[5] Paul Shin, "Defector Says N. Korea Building Atom Bomb," Washington Post, September 14, 1991, p. A20.

[6] Quoted in "North Korea Reported Near Nuclear Ability," New York Times, September 14, 1991, p. 2.

[7] Quoted in Shin.

[8] For years the United States refused to formally confirm the presence of such weapons, but observers generally believe the United States maintains between 100 and 150 nuclear artillery shells and air-delivered bombs on South Korean soil.

[9] Quoted in David Rosenbaum, "U.S. to Pull A-Bombs from South Korea," New York Times, October 20, 1991, p. 3.

[10] Quoted in Don Oberdorfer, "North Korea Welcomes U.S. Nuclear Withdrawal," Washington Post, October 3, 1991, p. A40.

[11] Quoted in T. R. Reid, "Changes Could Reduce Pressure on Leaders in South Korea, Japan," Washington Post, September 29, 1991, p. A33.

[12] "N. Korea Offers Trade-Off on Nukes," Washington Times, November 23, 1991, p. A6.

[13] Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Permanent Mission to the United Nations, "DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman Answers Questions by Report Regarding Pressure for Nuclear Inspection of DPRK," Press release no. 29, November 22, 1991.

[14] James Sterngold, "North Korea to Allow Nuclear Inspections if U.S. Does," New York Times, November 27, 1991, p. A3.

[15] David Sanger, "Cheney, in Korea, Orders Halt to U.S. Pullout," New York Times, November 22, 1991, p. A7.

[16] "President Roh Unveils Bold New Nuclear Policy Initiative," Statement no. 91-58, issued by South Korean embassy, November 7, 1991.

[17] Quoted in David Easter, "Korea Talks Gain Amid Nuke Scare Campaign," Guardian, November 20, 1991, p. 17.

[18] Easter. A joint U.S.-ROK statement issued three weeks later stated that North Korea's "nuclear arms program must be stopped in advance without fail." Quoted in David Sanger, "U.S. Officials Step Up Warnings to North Korea on Nuclear Arms," New York Times, November 21, 1991, p. A6.

[19] Quoted in Edward Neilan, "Talks Topped by North Korea Nuclear Agenda," Washington Times, November 19, 1991, p. A7.

[20] Stephen Chapman, "A Nuclear North Korea: The Danger We Can't Ignore," Creators Syndicate, November 14, 1991.

[21] Quoted in Steven Weisman, "North Korea Adds Barriers to A-Plant Inspections," New York Times, October 24, 1991, p. A11.

[22] Chapman.

[23] Iraq's Scud assaults on Israel were really directed at the multilateral coalition against Saddam Hussein. Moreover, he attacked with the knowledge that the United States would try to restrain Tel Aviv's response.

[24] North Korea is now developing the Scud-D, with a range of 1100 kilometers, that could reach Japan. Later advances could put Taiwan within range.

[25] Quoted in Thomas Friedman, "China Stalls Anti-Atom Effort on Korea," New York Times, November 15, 1991, p. A12.

[26] Quoted in Damon Darlin, "Roh's Nuclear-Free Pledge May Advance Effort to Inspect North Korean Facilities," Wall Street Journal, November 11, 1991, p. A10.

[27] Naturally, the Pentagon, which was reluctant to accept the cuts now planned, wants to move the other way. It an nounced in November that it is suspending the modest reduction of 5,000 to 6,000 in U.S. personnel set for 1993-95 until an accord is reached on Pyongyang's nuclear effort.

[28] For a more detailed discussion of the case for withdraw al, see Doug Bandow, "Leaving Korea," Foreign Policy 77 (Win ter 1989-90): 77-93; Doug Bandow, "Unfreezing Korea," Nation al Interest 25 (Fall 1991): 51-58.