

**Looking Back to the Future of the
North Korean Nuclear Problem**

By

**C. Kenneth Quinones, Ph.D.
Director of Global Studies and
Professor of Korean Studies
Akita International University, Japan**

For

***Arms Control Today*
November 2006**

North Korea's first nuclear test on October 2006 and the pending resumption of the Six Party Talks between China, Japan, Russia, the two Koreas and the United States continue to focus global attention on the Korean Peninsula's nuclear proliferation problem. An established method for predicting the future often involves first deciphering past trends, a basic premise of the social sciences. In this regard, persons concerned about North Korea's persistent nuclear ambitions are fortunate to have a growing library of books that traces the more than fifteen year history of this saga. Here we assess some of the works destined to remain indispensable reading on this topic:

Marion Creekmore, *A Moment of Crisis*. New York: Public Affairs, 2006.

Chuck Downs, *Over the Line – North Korea's Negotiating Strategy*. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute Press, 1999).

Selig Harrison, *The North Korean Endgame*.

Leon Sigal, *Disarming Strangers – Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Joel Wit, Daniel Poneman and Robert Gallucci, *The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis – Going Critical*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004.

We begin with the authors' areas of agreement. All of them agree that North Korea presents a particularly complex and dangerous challenge to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime as well as peace and conventional disarmament on the Korean Peninsula. They concur that the United States must remain engaged diplomatically and militarily with this issue and should play a leading role in resolving the matter. None advocate so-called "benign neglect" of North Korea. Nor do any condone North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons. On the contrary, they all insist that it is in the national interest of the United States and the international community that North Korea's nuclear weapons capability be completely dismantled and placed under international nuclear safeguards and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection. They also prefer a peaceful negotiated end to North Korea's nuclear capability, but recognize that ultimately some other approach might be necessary to preserve peace and stability in Northeast Asia as well as to buttress the credibility of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the cornerstone of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime.

The authors part company when it comes to discussing how best to achieve their shared goal. Selig Harrison and Chuck Downs represent polarities regarding this debate. The others cluster in the middle between them. Harrison argues that the shortcomings of the United States government, particularly the incumbent Bush Administration, has unnecessarily complicated and prolonged the negotiating process. He further contends that the Bush Administration's assertive, even provocative counter proliferation and deterrence postures have prodded Pyongyang toward developing its weapons of mass destruction. Harrison contends that the United States could nurture an atmosphere conducive to achieving a negotiated settlement by tempering its negative rhetoric and restraining its allegedly provocative military posture vis a vis North Korea. To make a diplomatic resolution a realistic possibility, Washington must then demonstrate its willingness to exchange substantive and concessions of equivalent value with Pyongyang.

Chuck Downs also faults the United States government, but for the opposite reasons. He claims that its “appeasement” of North Korea during the Clinton Administration encouraged Pyongyang to squeeze Washington for maximum inducements in exchange for minimal concessions. He further argues that North Korea’s historical track record of disregarding its treaty commitments and disrespect for international norms of conduct make it an unworthy negotiating partner. Also Pyongyang’s previous conduct mean that it cannot be relied upon to fulfill any future commitments that it might make. Negotiating with it, in Downs’ view, is useless, even dangerous. Instead, he urges the United States to avoid bilateral negotiations with North Korea and instead offer it an “all or nothing” deal. Either it agrees to dismantle all of its nuclear programs and submits to international verification, or it should be placed in international quarantine, both diplomatically and commercially. Ultimately, if necessary, the United States should consider steps that would eventually lead to the Kim Jong Il regime’s demise. Readers might recognize this argument as the antecedent of the Bush Administration’s “CVID” or “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement” position that it has maintained at the Six Party Talks.

Both authors base their arguments on a single assumption plus a single judgment: They assume that the United States government alone is responsible for the failure of diplomacy to end North Korea’s nuclear ambitious. Reality on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia, however, is much more complex. Since the Cold War’s end, the balance of power has been shifting in Northeast Asia. No long is the United States the dominate power. Economically, China and South Korea have made major strides toward prosperity, allowing both to become more assertive in pursuing their national interests. At the same time, the United States has been reducing its military prowess in the region by pressing South Korea and Japan to assume greater responsibility for their national defense. North Korea has also adjusted its defense posture. Unable to rely on the Soviet Union or Russia for a nuclear umbrella, Pyongyang first pursued in the 1990s a strategy of trying to normalize diplomatic and commercial relations with the United States, Japan and South Korea. When this fell short of its aims in 2002, North Korea appears to have opted to build its “nuclear deterrence capability.” In other words, United States strategy, both diplomatic and military, is but a single variable in the effort to end North Korea’s nuclear program. The strength of the Six Party Talks is that it more accurately reflects the emerging new realities in Northeast Asia. In short, a successful diplomatic resolution of the Korean Peninsula’s nuclear proliferation problem will require more than an adjustment of the United States’ strategy toward North Korea.

Both authors also pass judgment on North Korea as being either good or evil. Morality or its lack is not the problem. Of greater concern is Pyongyang’s potential to destabilize Northeast Asia and undermine the region’s peace and prosperity. When all is considered, the concerned nations have only two options for dealing with North Korea. Either they can pay the price of conflict with North Korea and the region’s reconstruction, or they can negotiate with it and exchange its nuclear weapons capability for two light water reactors plus the normalization of diplomatic and commercial relations. Given the shifting balance of power in Northeast Asia, the United States does not necessarily have the decisive say on which of the two options should be pursued.

The path to a negotiated settlement is well documented in our other three books. *Disarming Strangers* by Leon Sigal, a professional journalist, relies on eyewitness accounts by some members of the US negotiating team and contemporary media reports to outline the key developments and issues of the US-North Korea negotiations of 1993-94 that led to the October 1994 Agreed Framework. The result is a generally accurate narrative that guides the reader through the maze of events and discussions that eventually yielded an agreement. Sigal's primary focus is Washington, D.C. where U.S. policy was forged and Geneva where most of the talks occurred.

The book's primary shortcoming is its reliance on interviews and media reports. While generally accurate, they are not necessarily comprehensive in their coverage. Also, their intrinsic nature limits the author's, and thus the readers' ability to penetrate beyond the negotiations' surface. The focus on Washington means we learn only superficially about the concerns, priorities and strategies of Seoul and Pyongyang which were the other key players in these negotiations. One of the book's least convincing contentions is that "track II diplomacy" played a crucial role in achieving the final settlement. Rather, this thesis appears to have been included to satisfy the book's primary promoter, the Rockefeller Foundation that funded several "track II" efforts during the negotiations. None of these, however, proved to have a decisive impact on forging the final agreement.

Complementing and expanding upon Sigal's work is the more recent publication *Going Critical*. This book provides an authoritative look inside the Clinton Administration's handling of the negotiations that led to the Agreed Framework. Two of its three authors, Robert Gallucci and Dan Ponemen, play leading roles in the negotiations. Gallucci was the chief US negotiator and the Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs. Dan Ponemen served at the National Security Council as the chief adviser on nuclear non-proliferation issues. The third author, Joel Wit, worked in Washington to provide support for the U.S. negotiators in Geneva. Like Sigal, *Going Critical* concentrates on the period 1992 to 1994 and the negotiations in Geneva as well as in Washington between key Clinton Administration officials. We gain unprecedented insight into the diversity of views advocated within the administration at that time. We also learn more about the tensions between Washington and Seoul during these negotiations.

This book's greatest strength is also its primary weakness. The authors were granted unprecedented access to classified U.S. government documents compiled during the negotiations. This, however, was accomplished at a substantial price. Once drafted, the book underwent extensive scrutiny and editing at the Department of State, as pointed out in the book's introduction. The final product, therefore, is an officially sanctioned publication. We do not know what was deleted or edited, but we can say confidently that the full story of the negotiations has yet to be told. Further diminishing the value of the official archive is the fact that reports compiled during the negotiations were edited prior to being sent from Geneva to Washington, D.C. This was done to prevent critics of the talks in Washington from micro-managing the U.S. negotiators at the talks, a laudable intent. The written reports were augmented by secure telephone calls to key policy makers back home. Between the written and the telephone reports, the Clinton

Administration received comprehensive coverage of the negotiators. The written reports, however, are not necessarily as comprehensive in their coverage.

Disarming Strangers and *Going Critical*, despite their respective limitations, present the most reliable and comprehensive discussions available to date of the policy making process inside the Clinton Administration regarding the US-North Korea nuclear talks of 1993-94.

Both books are authoritatively supplemented by Marion Creekmore's, *A Moment of Crisis*. This book delves into former President Carter's June 1994 mission to Pyongyang to meet with Kim Il Sung in the hope of restarting the US-North Korea talks and to eliminate the need for the imposition of United Nations sanctions on North Korea. It is the first book to publicly and comprehensively present Carter's personal thoughts at the time and the unedited details of his talks with President Clinton, South Korea's President Kim Yong-sam and the North Korea leader just before his death. We learn of Carter's dismay with Washington's negative reaction to his breakthrough with Kim Il Sung that allow the official negotiations to resume. At the time, key figures in the Clinton Administration, in Carter's view, were more concerned with blunting domestic criticism of their North Korea strategy than maintaining peace in Northeast Asia. In this regard, White House officials believed that Carter's efforts and errors in Pyongyang had undermined their strategy of pushing Pyongyang back to the negotiating table using United Nations sanctions.

In the only decisive "track II" effort of the 1993-94 crisis, Carter broke with his previously close coordination with the Clinton Administration. He went outside "official channels" and used his access to the CNN television network to compel the Clinton Administration to pay attention to his efforts and to sanction them publicly. In the end, Carter succeeded in achieving all his goals. His discussions with Kim Il Sung convinced North Korea to return to negotiations with the United States without reverting to UN sanctions. This eliminated the risk of a second Korean War and restored progress toward a negotiated settlement.

The full history of the first nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula has yet to be written. Readers, however, have access to a reliable and comprehensive library of books that outline the historical context of the present crisis and the previous successful negotiations. Now that the Six Party Talks appear to be back on track, a review of the past will better enable readers to project what to expect in the future negotiations. Ultimately, any future negotiated settlement is likely to reflect key elements of the previous agreement.