

## **North Korea – Prospects for Denuclearization in 2008**

**By**  
**C. Kenneth Quinones, Ph.D.**  
**Former U. S State Department**  
**North Korea Affairs Officer**

**January 2008**

Prospects for progress toward North Korea's denuclearization in 2008 do not appear to be bright. After a year of unprecedented progress in 2007, progress stalled at year's end when North Korea's declaration of nuclear programs and materials failed to satisfy Washington. At the same time, Pyongyang countered that Washington failed to fulfill its commitment to drop it from the "terrorism list." But both concerns only hint at the impediments to future progress that must be overcome in 2008 if progress is to resume.

On the bright side, the Six Party Talks seem destined to resume eventually. When this might happen is anyone's guess. Nevertheless, participants in the talks do not have a better option. All the parties still prefer a peaceful diplomatic solution. They also generally agree that Pyongyang must eventually give up all its nuclear weapons programs. The basic problem remains what price to pay North Korea for nuclear disarmament.

North Korea clearly is struggling to determine what it expects in return for dismantling its "nuclear deterrent capability." North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, allegedly an absolute ruler, appears to be having difficulty managing the expectations of the military and diplomatic advisers who form his foreign policy team. One of the best indications of Kim's problem is the fact that he has repeatedly escalated his demands since the Six Party Talks began in 2003. Initially his diplomats only demanded direct bilateral negotiations with the United States, security assurances that Washington would not attack, and an end to the perceived "hostile policy."

Washington's abrupt alteration of its "no negotiations, no concessions" strategy early in 2007 initially caught North Korea off guard. Pyongyang's diplomats promptly adjusted and appeared to have matched Washington's willingness to end its "hostile policy" by making general commitments to denuclearize. But as Washington's demands became increasingly specific and concrete, Pyongyang's promises became increasingly vague. Instead, North Korea's wish list of what it expected from the United States blossomed into a long litany of very specific demands.

Today, Pyongyang's price for ending its "nuclear deterrent capability" includes: removal from the US "terrorism list," the end of the Trading with the Enemy Act sanctions, membership in international financial organizations such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, various forms of economic assistance, a peace treaty to end the Korean War, proof that there are no US nuclear weapons in South Korea, two light water

nuclear reactors and eventually the normalization of diplomatic and commercial relations with both the United States and Japan. Obviously this greatly exceeds what would be politically realistic for Washington and Tokyo to concede at the present time in exchange for North Korea's nuclear disarmament.

Meanwhile, in Washington, the Bush Administration is also struggling to manage its foreign policy team. Assistant Secretary Hill's diplomatic "surge" in 2007 has fallen short of the expectations he aroused during his numerous press conferences. After each encounter with his North Korean counterpart Kim Gye Kwan, Hill proudly proclaimed that he had won yet another pledge that Pyongyang would allow dismantlement of its most critical nuclear facilities and declare all of its nuclear programs and materials by the end of 2007. Unfortunately this did not happen. Hill naturally will point the finger of blame at North Korea. This may save him from his critics in Washington, but it will not endear him to his negotiating partners in Pyongyang.

At the same time, the Bush Administration faces a profound problem. Its "hard line" strategy of "no negotiations and no concessions" excited tensions in Northeast Asia without achieving any progress toward a negotiated settlement. Similarly, its abrupt shift to a "carrots without sticks" strategy in 2007 has now failed to achieve real progress. A shift to the "military option" seems very unlikely. Washington remains preoccupied militarily with Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, neither Seoul nor Tokyo appears inclined to support any armed action against North Korea. Hopefully the Bush Administration will eventually settle for a "carrot and stick" approach to North Korea's denuclearization, a strategy that the Clinton Administration successfully pursued in the 1990s.

Seoul, like Pyongyang and Washington, most likely will also spend the better part of 2008 refurbishing its strategy for how best to achieve North Korea's nuclear disarmament. President-elect Lee Myung-bak, however, must first deal with persistent allegations of financial wrong doing from an emotionally charged political opposition. At the same time, he must address his supporters' expectations that he will invigorate the economy while also repairing relations with Washington and Tokyo. Dealing with Pyongyang would appear to be relatively low on his priority list.

All of this suggests that 2008 might see very slow if any real progress toward an end to North Korea's nuclear weapons programs. Pyongyang after all has little reason to rush toward nuclear disarmament. Possession of a "nuclear deterrent capability" in the eyes of North Korea's generals ensures greater security from an United States attack than any security assurances that the Bush Administration might promise. Also, the longer it takes to achieve denuclearization, the more time Kim Jong Il's generals have to wed nuclear weapons to their ballistic missiles. In short, although out numbered five to one in the Six Party Talks, Pyongyang still appears to be in charge of the pace of progress toward an end to its nuclear weapons programs.

The author is currently Director of Global Studies and Korean Studies at Akita International University (*Kokusai kyoyo daigaku*) in Akita, Japan.