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North Korea: A Crisis in the Making

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by Damon Coletta

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The Policy Problem

The policy problem of how to stop North Korea's programs for acquiring weapons of mass destruction and missiles without starting a disastrous war on the peninsula likely will continue regardless of controlled tacks toward more accommodation or further intimidation. The vast majority of expert analyses, which has analyzed all manners of "carrots" and "sticks" for changing North Korean behavior, largely ignores the systemic level of analysis. While many do consider the positions of different states in the region—especially South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia—few highlight properties of the overall system of interactions that lie outside any one state's control. In the face of such persistent oscillation in policy, a more explicit accounting of system effects shows that U.S. officials are trapped not in another Cuban Missile Crisis, but rather in a Vietnam-like quagmire. They find themselves stuck in the same incrementalism, with alternate steps toward peace then war, for the same types of reasons. It may be that the North Korean quagmire is infinitely preferable to Vietnam because so far, at least, it involves hundreds of millions of dollars rather than hundreds of thousands of casualties. Still, there is a nagging gap in logic that predicts naval operations for the new Proliferation Security Initiative and the intercession of China—all examples of carefully calibrated squeezing—will have more decisive results on Kim Jong Il than limited bombing and Soviet mediation had on Ho Chi Minh.

Ever since North Korea defied International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors in 1993 and threatened to build its own nuclear arsenal, U.S. policy has lurched between accommodation and intimidation. In order to freeze North Korean reprocessing of plutonium for nuclear warheads, the Clinton administration did accede to an Agreed Framework that traded economic aid for shutting down the five-megawatt reactor complex at Yongbyon. Yet, in the months before former president Jimmy Carter's dramatic peace mission to Pyongyang in June 1994, the Clinton administration threatened air strikes if necessary to halt the North Koreans' nuclear program. Moreover, once the framework was signed, delays in fuel oil shipments and light water reactor construction were justified in part as strategy to help foster regime collapse in Pyongyang, which was supposedly inevitable due to economic mismanagement and widespread food shortages.^[1]

The change in presidential administration did not bring much difference in the level of policy vacillation. As Victor Cha notes in *Foreign Affairs*, and as several other commentators have pointed out, the current Bush team is also split between those who would prefer a more hawkish approach and those who see U.S. interests better served through engagement with North Korea.^[2] At various times, President Bush has criticized the "sunshine policy" of South Korea, signed a policy review in support of broad engagement, named North Korea to the "axis of evil," and earmarked the North Korean problem as one that, unlike Iraq, can be solved through peaceful diplomacy.

As of Summer 2004, six-party talks on North Korea have not produced any agreement. In fact, it is not at all clear which mix of threats and concessions could eventually resolve the issue. During the June round of talks in Beijing, the United States created a stir among associate delegations from China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea by offering an apparent concession. In the midst of domestic criticism during an election year about the lack of U.S. initiative on a high-level national security issue, the Bush administration promised that the United States could arrange substantial economic and diplomatic rewards for the regime of Kim Jong Il if North Korea agreed to a three-month plan for dismantling all of their nuclear programs.[3]

The offer tacked U.S. policy on North Korea toward positive incentives. Since October 2002, the Bush team had cited evidence of a North Korean uranium enrichment program, complained about the lack of verifiability in the 1994 Agreed Framework, and condemned the perfidy of North Korean diplomacy. While it agreed to multilateral dialogue, the administration cut off benefits from the Framework, particularly aid for civilian nuclear plants and fuel oil shipments, and for many months it declined to actually bargain until North Korea complied with its previous commitments.[4] In contrast, the June 2004 offer came in the context of U.S. forces and political capital stretched thin due to difficult postwar operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The regional powers in East Asia, including Japan and South Korea, which have contingents in Iraq, also pushed for a softer approach to North Korea.[5] The price for bringing in these partners to help pressure North Korea was to even further raise the costs for the United States of using harsh measures such as counter-proliferation strikes or more aggressive sanctions that would cut deeper into North Korea's aid imports and arms exports.

Nevertheless, recent indications of accommodation in U.S. policy will most likely melt back into the volatile twists and turns that have subsisted for more than a decade. After the June talks, North Korea wasted little time in calling the U.S. initiative a sham. North Korean officials were, in part, responding to separate bilateral visits to Seoul and Tokyo undertaken by hawkish Undersecretary of State for Arms Control, John Bolton, who reiterated that a North Korean freeze—such as that negotiated in 1994—was not sufficient to reap rewards from the West. Bolton insisted that North Korea's nuclear intentions have been military all along and only verifiable dismantlement, such as that accepted by Libya in December 2003, would settle the conflict.[6]

The fourth round of six-party talks are still expected for September 2004, but barring a surprise Korean withdrawal that would break the cycle of action-reaction, U.S. moves add up to a larger holding pattern, at least until the November elections. This is not to say that a variety of hard and soft signals will not be sent in ensuing months, but U.S. policies to either squeeze North Korea and dramatically increase the risk of war, or accommodate North Korea and allow concessions that not even Japan and South Korea are prepared to make seems unlikely. Without the high probability of escalation, resolution, or war, it is difficult, objectively, to locate the U.S.-North Korean conflict at the center of a crisis system playing out in East Asia.

Crisis Systems

Several policy analysts nevertheless already refer to the North Korean situation as a crisis in order to mark the shadow of war and emphasize the threat of nuclear proliferation to U.S. security. If, indeed, there is something fundamentally different about true crises as opposed to rhetorical ones, it matters whether the case of North Korea actually meets the technical criteria or not. In fact, the North Korea case makes a poor fit with historical crisis dynamics. The mismatch leads to a new question about U.S. policy: namely whether it makes sense to precipitate a real crisis in an effort to halt North Korea's nuclear program.[7]

In order to appreciate a technical definition for crisis, it helps to think about a system of international interactions that may exist outside of conventional foreign policy analysis. Systems theory makes sense when analyzing situations that involve multiple players involved in strategic interaction. It encourages observers to take a holistic approach and remain alert for the possibility that overall outcomes may be quite different from the actions or intentions of any individual involved in the system. Kenneth Waltz

(1979) founded a new school of thought in the study of international relations by refining a precise definition for the international system and attributing general patterns to it as opposed to the policies of individual states.[8]

Waltz's approach prompted a litany of criticism. Overall "systems" have to have characteristics that are somehow influenced by, yet greater than the sum of, individual qualities. In practice, state and system properties are easily confused, as when system theorists must debate how a small state acquiring nuclear weapons changes the polarity, or distribution of power, in a regional sub-system. Because tracking the impetus of several simultaneous actors, each with an array of options spread over time, is inherently complex, analysts can be overwhelmed by detail—imperfectly tracking systems within systems. More frequently they accept pragmatic compromises, adopting sweeping simplifications that make area experts and historians wince.

Nevertheless, there is persuasive evidence that political systems do emerge in international politics. The multi-polar competitive system before World War I, the Bretton Woods system after World War II, and the Cold War system until 1989 all seemed to have an identifiable steady state with characteristics that accommodated a wide range of changes within individual powers. Looking at the system, as opposed to an exclusive focus on the actions of particular actors, offers the chance for a fresh perspective. What appear to be sharp divergences between Clinton policies and Bush policies toward North Korea at one level may fit into a larger pattern (Table 1), a steady oscillation at the system level.

Indeed, a persistent pendulum swing between harsher measures intended to break Pyongyang and economic or security concessions to assuage the regime suggests the presence of some system constraints outside the reliable control of all the players. Pointedly, it does not suggest the onset of crisis. During the Cold War and particularly after the near miss in Cuba, academics took pains to distinguish crises from other events in international affairs. Rather than a bolt from the blue, it was thought that nuclear war with the Soviet Union, if it came, would develop out of failure to manage a crisis situation. In order to better understand both the causes and consequences of crisis behavior, analysts needed a formal definition. The difficulty of fitting messy historical examples into precise categories has so far frustrated political scientists: there is no single list of necessary and sufficient conditions. With that caveat in mind, a rough consensus does exist, and it is possible to build a working definition of crisis in order to analyze the international interaction involved in the Korea case.[9]

For the purposes of understanding whether the North Korean question qualifies as a crisis, analysts should pay special attention to necessary conditions. A crisis system in the international context means that (1) multiple players on different sides of a conflict perceive a serious threat to their own national interests; (2) decision makers must labor under circumstances of surprise due to unanticipated moves or natural accidents; and (3) the conflict must be headed toward a mutually feared outcome, a disastrous final arbiter such as general war, unless settlement comes within a limited and shrinking timeframe.

North Korea: Not Yet a Crisis

North Korea is a crisis in the making—not yet a crisis—because there is no final arbiter bearing down on the two principal parties within a finite timeframe.[10] The conflict over proliferation could carry on indefinitely, with North Korea taking provocative steps toward marrying nuclear warheads and long-range missiles while the United States offers a mix of economic incentives and military threats to reverse the process. U.S. policy choices with respect to Korea must still be well conceived. Careless punishments or idle threats could make the situation worse, especially with respect to America's allies and other potential partners in the region. Given the shabby treatment that Congress gave the Agreed Framework from its beginning, any president of either party could expect domestic opposition if concessions on aid, civilian nuclear power, or security guarantees suddenly materialized in return for unverifiable promises. Policy still matters because the first two criteria in the crisis definition hold. The capacity for a stable North Korea to take options away from the United States in its defense of South Korea and Japan, or the possible damage that might occur through the sale of nuclear weapons as a survival strategy for Pyongyang certainly qualifies as serious proliferation outcomes for the United States. Moreover, in the

diplomacy to date, both sides have shown themselves capable of surprise tactics. It is the third criterion for a crisis at the system level, or in this case, the lack of an imminent collapse, which distinguishes the current conflict from a crisis. Unless the system shifts modes—from a pendulum swing into a crisis—the expectation is that representatives of Washington and Pyongyang will work hard but remain largely in the same place.

A shift in the system, now over a decade old, could come about in a number of ways. On the peaceful end of the spectrum, either North Korea or the United States could essentially withdraw from the conflict. Pyongyang might find a way to extend market reforms, which have been incremental thus far, while still preserving social control. It might win a security guarantee and a new aid package, as it permits inspections for verifying a full stop to nuclear weapons programs. Alternatively, the United States might decide that the short-term price of an agreement, like the cost of war on the peninsula, outweighs the future costs of a nuclear North Korea; it could skip the proliferation issue and try to let Kim Jong-Il's regime run its course, all the while outbidding it for support from South Korea, Japan, and China. Much more violent outcomes have already been contemplated during ten years of diplomacy on the proliferation issue. Economic pressures could finally force a collapse in Pyongyang, along with civil war and massive refugee flows into China and South Korea. Before the collapse actually occurs, Kim Jong Il could lash out in frustration or panic, or the United States, sensing an opportunity to permanently cripple North Korea's weapons programs, could invoke its new National Security Strategy and opt for a preventive strike—before North Korean nuclear dangers gather.

The final possibility for exiting the pendulum swing between accommodation and intimidation is a conversion of the system from a "crisis in the making" to a full-blown crisis. Before exploring this scenario in detail, it is helpful to see that the other outcomes, more clearly peaceful or violent, are also quite unlikely. That is, there may be a number of reasons to reject consideration of intentionally exacerbating the situation with North Korea. However, upon reflection, the small chance of a real crisis matters because the chance of crisis is still about as high as the chance for reform, collapse, or war: all of these are low probability events compared to the continuation of today's tit-for-tat coercive diplomacy.

Making a Genuine Crisis with North Korea

At present, it appears that if a true crisis was to come, it would most likely be triggered by a U.S. move. Granted, in the face of imminent collapse, Pyongyang could be the one to issue an ultimatum, but it is harder to foresee what sort of demand it could extract from the United States to save itself under rapidly deteriorating conditions. In the event that Kim Jong-Il utterly lost rational control of his government, the situation for the United States would then be less like crisis bargaining and more like coping with a natural disaster—an approaching hurricane rather than a game of chicken.

Ethical considerations aside, it is difficult to imagine that the Bush administration could muster approval, domestically or among allies abroad, for starting the doomsday clock. Recently, official U.S. policy has taken the opposite tack, describing the importance of a revived North Korean nuclear program, without declaring it a crisis. Rather than forcing the issue with unilateral threats, as in the case of Iraq, the administration has consulted with allies and potential strategic partners on cooperative efforts to slowly raise the pressure on Pyongyang by gently squeezing its external monetary sources.^[11]

In the future, however, circumstances could arise where the United States would find support at home and less resistance abroad for an ultimatum. For example, if a nuclear explosion were detonated on U.S. soil, U.S. investigators might find circumstantial evidence linking components back to North Korea, but they also might not be able to rule out other sources such as stolen material from an abandoned Soviet program. Under these conditions, the United States might follow its precedent with the Taliban government in Afghanistan shortly after September 11th. That is, the United States could demand high levels of cooperation from Pyongyang in short order to prove its innocence. The American measures might be intrusive or debilitating enough to make Kim Jong-Il hesitate to comply. At that point, crisis bargaining over the fate of Pyongyang and Seoul would truly begin, with all the elements of high stakes, surprise, and limited time.

Admittedly, this vision of crisis hardly helps current policy makers, who are struggling to reduce the North Korean threat to the United States. It presupposes the worst attack on U.S. soil since the Civil War, with immediate casualties possibly on the order of Gettysburg. The scenario ends with responsible decision makers days or hours away from even greater destruction in the cities of close American allies. Thinking in system terms about the anatomy of crises highlights the point that Americans would be in even greater danger if a North Korean nuclear crisis actually materialized.

Before rejecting crisis scenarios as patently unacceptable, though, experts might note a couple of implications. For one thing, a genuine crisis would heighten the danger for both North Korea and the United States. Because selling nuclear weapons to terrorists would significantly increase the chances of a massive attack on the United States and, subsequently, war with the United States, North Korea would probably think twice before equating the sale of nuclear weapons—a likely crisis trigger if detected—with its previous for-profit missile sales to Pakistan. Analysts routinely build an automatic link between future nuclear sales and past missile exports.^[12] This fallacy is harder to detect when the current system erroneously assumes the designation of a crisis *already* in progress; misidentification of the current system leads observers to predict by induction what would actually be a drastic discontinuity in North Korean behavior.

Secondly, as horrifying as it was, the Cuban Missile Crisis did not incapacitate either adversary, even though they operated under quite different domestic constraints. While it is true that subsequent leaders did not want a reprise at that level of intensity, the incentive structure in the October 1962 crisis elevated the rewards for a verifiable settlement and correspondingly lowered the net benefits of cheating. Placing millions of East Asians in imminent danger of a violent death in order to frustrate the aims of a small Stalinist state fails as moral policy. Yet, rather than rejecting the exploitation of crisis systems out of hand, policy makers should at least go through the exercise of weighing the greater risks of crisis against the higher chance of a verifiable settlement—one profound enough to mellow the underlying, long-term conflict. This sort of consideration prompts the question of whether any sort of crisis system could improve the U.S. position with respect to North Korea. In order to constitute a crisis system, the final arbiter that both sides dread does not have to be a mutually destructive war. Any sword of Damocles will do. The important difference between crisis bargaining and direct coercion is that, in crises, the sword hangs over both adversaries instead of just the target.

In the North Korea case, general war is not the only thing that both parties wish to avoid. Returning to the root causes of this dispute, Pyongyang, Washington, and other governments in the region all dread what could happen if nuclear weapons were to proliferate throughout East Asia. Most analysts view such proliferation as an unacceptable outcome. Yet, most policy reviews stop just there, without exploring the possibility that quickly expanding nuclear arsenals in South Korea and Japan, and a new level of concern in China, might hit North Korea even harder.

The ultimate threat to deter proliferation is not limited war. The ultimate deterrent is instead the common realization that a region with many nuclear powers would be more dangerous for urban population concentrations in the area and less secure for all governments concerned. North Korea's military and its proximity to Seoul may give it an effective deterrent against war, but Pyongyang still recoils at the idea of falling behind both South Korea and Japan in a nuclear arms race. Presently, North Korea justifies its nuclear development in terms of protecting its sovereignty from U.S. imperialism, but its territorial integrity would be more endangered with large, difficult-to-manage-arsenals deployed less than 1000 km from Pyongyang. In the macabre irony of crisis systems, the most effective way to stop an adversary from building nuclear weapons and wrecking the painstakingly constructed nonproliferation regime may be to take several brash steps—not toward preemptive air strikes—but toward more proliferation.

Against the viability of a true brinkmanship strategy there is the requirement that South Korea and Japan make a credible threat to embrace nuclear weapons. The graver the dangers involved in doing so, the more serious will be the crisis bargaining, but at the same time, the more difficult it will be to convince North Korea that a nuclear arms race is truly on the horizon.

While it is generally true that U.S. allies in East Asia have all along preferred more accommodation and less intimidation than either the Clinton or Bush administrations, Prime Minister Koizumi of Japan has recently taken a harder line on nuclear proliferation and national missile defense, and South Korea's liberal President Roh has proposed large increases in military spending as U.S. troops reposition themselves south, away from the demilitarized zone. As difficult as it is to shape outcomes with South Korea and Japan, five power-plus talks are even more complex. Unlike the use of economic sanctions—an example of scrupulous coercion to drive North Korea into a satisfactory agreement—brinkmanship, with general proliferation as the abyss, would not require prior approval from Russia or China.

Thus far, the United States and North Korea have been about equal in their eagerness to avoid general war on the peninsula, and this has contributed to the static nature, or more precisely, the steady state oscillation in US-North Korean interactions. If Pyongyang dreads general proliferation more intensely than the United States, it might be possible to slow North Korean nuclear development short of an acute crisis by announcing hypothetical conditions for when other East Asian militaries would acquire nuclear missiles. For example, an explicit policy that any nuclear attack—no matter how small—on U.S., South Korean, or Japanese soil would automatically result in general proliferation, and could place North Korea in an awkward position. Not being able to fully control whether terrorists manage a nuclear strike against American interests, but keen to avoid general proliferation, Pyongyang, without rescinding any of its current demands, might have more interest and a narrowing timeframe for finding measures that would allow the international community to verify a ban on weapons-related construction or sales.

Conclusion

Most observers of the policy dilemma posed by North Korea want to provide a comprehensive inventory of carrots and sticks available to both sides and a careful accounting of the costs and benefits from potential reactions and counter-reactions. This approach comes from a natural desire to highlight opportunities for control, particularly for the American President to make a positive difference in the conflict's outcome if he selects wisely from his options. Steeped in the nuances of political rhetoric and intra-governmental maneuvers, these analyses often see dramatic differences between Clinton administration engagement and Bush administration estrangement.^[13]

As an alternative, the "systems" approach has been roundly criticized for disappointing, or worse, misleading policy makers because it skips details and categorizes actions with important differences into the same Procrustean bed. Nevertheless, this paper has argued that the concept of systems helps provide a big-picture view that goes beyond listing the attributes of individual actors. In the case of interactions swirling around proliferation on the Korean peninsula, a systems approach challenges terms such as "brinkmanship" and "crisis." The Korean case thus far fails to qualify as a true crisis because neither side has a sense of inevitable, onrushing, and mutual disaster. Without a common sense that the doomsday clock is ticking for both sides, crisis bargaining and brinkmanship are terms of art rather than analysis.

Brinkmanship involves surrendering control, entering the loose gravel near the edge of the precipice, but in the Korean case, the chief adversaries have tacitly cooperated in crisis avoidance. Both sides assiduously practice limited accommodation and limited intimidation to coerce the other without tempting war. Yet, the strong probability of war—or some comparable disaster that would wrest control from all the players—is what would wield sufficient heft to collapse the current balance of interactions.

From the systemic perspective, similarities between the Clinton and Bush policies appear more relevant than the stylistic differences. Victor Cha's eloquent advocacy for a strategy of "hawk engagement" makes sense from the point of view of framing the oscillation between accommodation and intimidation so that it is more self-conscious and easier to indemnify against American domestic criticism. Yet, from the crude lens of systems analysis, this is more or less how Clinton and Bush have been reacting since 1993. Barring a collapse of Kim Jong-Il's regime or its decision to take an extreme risk and pursue nuclear cooperation with a terror group, the present system of crisis avoidance—both sides creatively seeking leverage over the other but always far from the precipice—should function as it has to this point.

Even so, policy makers who fear what an unforeseen shock might bring to a "crisis in the making" should consider that actual crisis systems do not have to involve the coming of war itself. In the Korean case, general proliferation would also represent a horrendous deterioration in security for all concerned. As a powerful actor, the United States could start the doomsday clock ticking toward general proliferation or, more credibly, it could name conditions under which it would abandon nonproliferation goals and push toward a new abyss: a nuclear arms race drawing in its East Asian allies.

North Korea has performed well since it launched a crisis in the making by convincing the United States that if American representatives pushed too hard in negotiations, North Korea—being poor and totalitarian—would more willingly risk disaster and pull the two countries into a genuine war crisis. Pyongyang may not succeed in stealing the same argument with respect to a proliferation crisis. If North Korea pushes too hard in negotiations, the United States, Japan, and South Korea—being rich and victorious in the Cold War—might more willingly risk disaster and pull East Asia into a general arms race. A switch in focus from war to proliferation could actually make the longstanding policy of crisis *avoidance* smoother going for the United States.

Negotiations to avoid proliferation will still demand compromise as well as coercion. However, settlements coming out of a situation where Pyongyang is relatively less sanguine about the risks involved could be more effective for slowing its weapons development and reducing the probability of future nuclear sales. Should a crisis eventually occur despite efforts to avoid one, a better crisis, with general proliferation rather than war as the looming disaster, would give the United States a higher chance of exiting the competition in risk-taking with a favorable and verifiable settlement.

See [Table 1](#).

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