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By Tim Beal

The nuclear test by the DPRK has led to a predictable deluge of hype and hypocrisy, amidst a dearth of informed and sensible comment. Politicians, and journalists, have reveled in the situation. North Korea is a convenient whipping boy, with few friends. It tends to be excoriated across the political spectrum. Since it is a small country targeted by the world's superpower, which, though hemorrhaging and perhaps in relative decline, still possesses such formidable political, economic and military power that no country, or international civil servant for that matter, dares openly speak up, even if they so desired. Politicians have hastened to express moral outrage even if, and perhaps especially if, they come from countries which have many nuclear weapons and have conducted tests. Journalists have been having a field day, many delighting in the opportunity to write lurid stories unencumbered by the need to check facts and qualify opinions. Under the circumstances, it is more necessary than ever before to keep a clear head and try to disentangle fact from fantasy, to unearth what has been going on, and what is likely to happen.

Despite Senator John McCain's attack on Clinton's Korea policy, it is clear that this particular bomb is very much the godchild of the Bush administration. [1] Without having any illusions about Clinton (or Kim Jong Il), it is useful to remind ourselves what would probably have happened had the Agreed Framework, signed in 1994 between the US and the DPRK, actually been implemented. Had the Bush administration continued with that agreement rather than tearing it up, then things would almost certainly be very different. It is well known that the Clinton administration was dilatory in implementing the agreement. By the time it left office the Light Water Reactors (LWRs) were years behind schedule, and, although Secretary of State Albright did visit Pyongyang in October 2000, little progress had been made on Pyongyang's key diplomatic goal, the normalization of relations with the US. [2] Loss of control of Congress was part of part of the reason for this, although it may have owed something to the dawning realization that the DPRK was not going to collapse anytime soon. However, the Agreed Framework was still in place and, under pressure from Seoul, Washington was moving to honor its commitments. The Albright visit was certainly seen by Pyongyang as an indication of that. [3] The Bush administration reversed this process.

Had the LWRs been completed and commissioned, the electricity shortage, which impacts so heavily on industry, agriculture, and on the life of ordinary people, would be much mitigated, and perhaps on the way toward a solution. The electricity grid is quite inadequate, it is said, and there are myriad problems across the economy, including lack of spare parts and oil, worn out machinery, ill-maintained road and rail networks, etc. The LWRs would have been no panacea but, in the context of the rest of the agreement and warming North-South economic relations, would have made a crucial contribution to economic recovery. The Agreed Framework also promised that the US would not threaten nuclear attack and would lift sanctions and move towards the normalisation of relations

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between the two countries. Illusions about Kim Jong Il are not an issue because under the agreement the DPRK front-loaded its concession – the mothballing of the reactor – in return for promises from the US. With every passing day Pyongyang had more reason to press for the agreement's implementation, and less reason to break it. Crucially, that includes the alleged clandestine uranium-enrichment program for nuclear weapons.



Incomplete light water reactor in North Korea

Had this plan for peace been carried out, and had the DPRK been able to open its economy, receive foreign investment (still more had it received compensation from Japan for the colonial period in the context of normalization of relations), and expand its exports, then we can reasonably surmise that the economy would be on the way to recovery and the life of the people greatly improved. Indeed some in the business community consider that if the opportunities promised by the Agreed Framework had eventuated, then the North Korean economy could have taken off, and could still do so. [4]

In particular, there is every reason to believe that the 9 October test would not have been carried out and North Korea would not have extracted plutonium from its Yongbyon reactor to build a nuclear deterrent. Had the LWRs been completed, Yongbyon would have been dismantled and shipped out of the country. The DPRK would not have had the capability, nor the reason, to carry out the nuclear test. Nor, in peaceful circumstances, would it have carried out the missile tests in July.



North Korean missile

The Bush administration tore up the Agreed Framework because, it claimed, the DPRK had a secret programme to enrich uranium as a 'second path' to nuclear weapons. It has not produced any evidence to back up its allegations, and the Washington Post has noted that 'intelligence officials said they cannot substantiate… that Pyongyang is already enriching uranium'. [5] The Chinese have made it clear that they do not believe the charges, and it is significant that the Joint Statement of 19 September 2005 at the Six Party Talks made no mention of uranium, probably at Chinese insistence. [6]

The basis of the recent US accusations seems to be the statements extracted from Pakistan by a combination of bribery and threats ("We will bomb you back to the Stone Age",

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according to Musharraf). [7] No one can be certain that North Korea does not have, or had, a programme for developing uranium-based weapons; as Rumsfeld himself has pointed out (in respect of Pakistan), "You can't prove a negative". [8] However, the public evidence is very thin and the assertions have a curious history.

Selig Harrison, writing in Foreign Affairs in 2005 has suggested that the DPRK did indeed have a modest uranium enrichment program, but for producing fuel for the anticipated LWRs. [9] Not so, argued Mitchell B. Reiss, former Director of Policy Planning at the State Department, and Robert L. Gallucci, who had negotiated the Agreed Framework for Clinton. In the next issues of Foreign Affairs they claimed that the Bush administration had 'clear evidence' of a weapons program, that this has been shared with the other countries in the Six Party Talks, and in any case fuel was unnecessary since North Korea would have been assisted to secure a foreign supply. [10] On the last point it will be recalled that security of the nuclear energy fuel cycle is a key issue in the current confrontation between Iran and the United States. Moreover, it is said that the technology, which found its way to the DPRK via Pakistan, originated in Western Europe in the early 1970s in a program designed to provide secure fuel for Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, independent of the United States. [11]

Gallucci returned to the fray in November 2006 claiming that North Korea had been cheating by 'secretly receiving components for a gas-centrifuge uranium-enrichment facility from Pakistan'. The Clinton administration knew about this, was planning to take it up with Pyongyang, but 'time ran out', he contends. The Bush administration however confronted Pyongyang and 'abandoned the Agreed Framework'. [12] Gallucci does not suggest that the Bush administration had new information, or that the situation had changed. The article is a clear criticism of Bush policy, but with a gentleness which says a lot about the limitations and protocols of American elite foreign policy debate. It does not, however, address the central issue of why the Agreed Framework was abandoned, and the time and manner that was done. The timing, Jonathan Pollack has argued, was due to US fears that the Kim-Koizumi summit of September 2002 would bring about a Pyongyang-Tokyo rapprochement which would undercut US strategy regional and global. [13]

The Clinton administration obviously did not feel that whatever concerns it had about the alleged uranium enrichment justified abrogating its agreement with Pyongyang. Indeed, it came under fierce attack in 1999 from Representative Benjamin A. Gilman, (Republican) Chairman of the House International Relations Committee who asserted "that there is significant evidence that North Korea is continuing its activities to develop nuclear weapons. Remarkably, North Korea's efforts to acquire uranium technologies, that is, a second path to nuclear weapons, and their efforts to weaponize their nuclear material do not violate the 1994 Agreed Framework. That is because the Clinton Administration did not succeed in negotiating a deal with North Korea that would ban such efforts." [14]

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Whether the Bush administration did have compelling evidence in 2002 that the situation warranted drastic action is unknown. Given the administration's record over Iraq, its attempts to 'mislead allies' over spurious claims of North Korean nuclear exports to Libya, and the recent report on Iran that was attacked by UN inspectors as 'outrageous and dishonest', it seems much more likely that the American claim was bogus and designed to destroy Clinton's agreement rather than being based on any significant evidence that the DPRK had a meaningful program. [15]

What happens now? Even if the DPRK does manage to develop a modest deliverable nuclear weapon, and that is probably a long way off, it is not, in itself, the threat that the hype would have us believe. For a small country faced with an adversary of overwhelming superiority, a nuclear weapon with undemonstrated launch capability, could only be used as a last resort, if, for example, the US was actually mounting an invasion. The US could use nuclear weapons offensively against a North Korea, or an Iran, but it does not work the other way round. If it had the capability, North Korea could conceivably threaten South Korea, Japan, or ultimately the continental US itself, not as 'blackmail' to extract concessions, as is frequently alleged, but only to deter. Although bluff, pre-emption, or miscalculation, are all possible elements, they are overshadowed by the disparity in power. 'First use' would bring overwhelming retaliation. Pyongyang has also said it will not transfer nuclear weapons—'the DPRK will never use nuclear weapons first but strictly prohibit any threat of nuclear weapons and nuclear transfer'—and this seems plausible. [16] The specter of 'North Korea selling nuclear weapons to terrorists' and similar lurid phantasmagorias are often raised, fueling public paranoia. [17] Informed commentators tend to discount such fears, if for no other reasons than limited supply and fear of detection. [18] Except, again, if the enemy was at the gates, when presumably all constraints might be off.

Whilst the possibility of nuclear contamination from testing is an issue, the real danger arising out of the DPRK test, and the one that particularly worries the Chinese, is that it could well provide the stimulus, and excuse, for others to go nuclear – South Korea, Taiwan, but most likely, and most consequentially, Japan. Under new Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Japan is moving, with US encouragement, to scrap its 'Peace Constitution' and become a 'normal country' by completing its remilitarisation. It has a large nuclear power industry, rockets, an arms budget comparable to that of China and Russia, and a formidable technological base. Japan could quite soon become a major nuclear weapons state, with full-spectrum military capabilities, an option that is being publically discussed by figures close to the administration. This in turn would spark an arms race with China. [19]

Here, perhaps, is the clue to what has been happening. Did the administration know when it scrapped the Agreed Framework that the DPRK would end up developing a plutonium

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bomb? We don't know, but it can be documented that at every stage of the process as the DPRK offered to negotiate away its nuclear programme, the US refused, predictably forcing Pyongyang to take the next step. Similarly, by imposing financial sanctions on Pyongyang on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations of counterfeiting, the US derailed the Six Party Talks after the Chinese-drafted joint statement of 19 September 2005 offered a way to resolve the crisis. [20] All parties, including the United States, signed that agreement, which started unraveling before the day was out. [21]

Is the DPRK nuclear weapon an unintended consequence of inept Bush administration policy as many of its opponents argue, or is it the product of intelligent design? To the people who brought us murder and mayhem in the Middle East, a remilitarized and nuclear armed Japan to complement a nuclear India on the other side of China might seem desirable. Especially if it produced an arms race that would sap the rising economic challenge of China. On top of which, the crisis may well abort President Roh Moo-hyun's plans to regain control of the military from the Americans and might open up the possibility of the Pentagon being able to deploy South Korean, and Japanese, troops in combat to bolster hard-pressed US forces elsewhere in the world. This is not to say, of course, that there was some sort of concerted conspiracy. For one thing, the administration is divided; 'realists' versus 'neocons' is one formulation. In the event, the neocons may have calculated that the chances of North Korea developing an effective nuclear weapon were slight compared with the benefits likely to flow from an aggressive policy. The prize would be worth the risks.

To what degree the nuclear test led to the agreement of 31 October to resume the Six Party Talks is unclear. Obviously it made it even more important for China to get the talks restarted, to attempt to forestall Japanese moves to nuclearise, if for no other reason. What pressure Beijing was willing to impose on Pyongyang, and able to impose on Washington remains uncertain, although there are rumors. In particular, it was suggested in South Korea that some agreement had been reached with Washington on financial sanctions and North Korea has explicitly said that "The DPRK decided to return to the six-party talks on the premise that the issue of lifting financial sanctions will be discussed and settled between the DPRK and the U.S". [22] The looming mid-term elections in the US, and the short-term advantage of claiming a diplomatic victory at a time when the Iraq and Afghan wars show signs of imploding, may well have influenced the Administration's calculations.

However, it seems unlikely at this stage that the resumed talks will produce much in the way of substantial progress. The underlying realities and strategic policies of all six parties remain unchanged.

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Notes

[1] Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Parties Trade Blame in Wake of Korea Claim," New York Times, 11 October 2006.

[2] Robert Gallucci, "Nuclear Shockwaves: Ramifications of the North Korean Nuclear Test," Arms Control Today, November 2006.

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People's Korea, 149th issue, October 2000.

[4] Joe McDonald, "North Korea Is 'Hungry for Business'," ABC News International from Associated Press, Beijing, 5 November 2006.

[5] Dafna Linzer, "U.N. Inspectors Dispute Iran Report By House Panel," Washington Post, 14 September 2006, A17.

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[8] Reuters, "Rumsfeld Clears Musharraf of Nuclear Trafficking," New York Times, 28 March 2004.

[9] Selig S. Harrison, "Did North Korea Cheat?," Foreign Affairs, January/February 2005.

[10] Mitchell B. Reiss and Robert Gallucci, "Red handed," Foreign Affairs, March/April 2005.

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[12] Gallucci, "Nuclear Shockwaves: Ramifications of the North Korean Nuclear Test."

[13] Jonathan D. Pollack, "The United States, North Korea, and the end of the Agreed Framework," Naval War College Review LVI, no. 3 (2003).

[14] Benjamin A. Gilman, "Gilman releases North Korea Report," Press release, 3 November 1999.

[15] Dafna Linzer, "U.S. Misled Allies About Nuclear Export," Washington Post, 20 March 2005. Linzer, "U.N. Inspectors Dispute Iran Report By House Panel."

[16] "DPRK Foreign Ministry Clarifies Stand on New Measure to Bolster War Deterrent," KCNA, 3 October 2006.

[17] One questioner asked David Kang in an online discussion, "Is North Korea going to try to put warheads on missiles on subs? Will they sell those to other states like Saudi Arabia or Iran? Is Pakistan working on the same thing? Will North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Palestinian Authority, Iran, new Iraq, Cuba, Venezuela, etc. have these subs in 5 to 10 years off the coasts of Europe, America and India? Will they form a new axis around this? Will they ask us for money as a group in a shakedown?" David C. Kang, "North Korea Threatens Nuclear Test (transcript of online discussion)," Washington Post, 4 October 2006.

[18] Bruce Cumings, "Fear and Loathing on the Pyongyang Trail: North Korea and the United States," Japan Focus, 12 December 2005.

[19] Marcus Noland, "A Nuclear North Korea: Where Do We Go from Here?," Straits Times, 11 October 2006.

[20] Gregory Elich, "Why Bush is Seeking Confrontation With North Korea," Counterpunch, 27/29 October 2006.

[21] Tim Beal, "Discordant Beijing Sextet Plays in Harmony: But for How Long?," New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies 7, no. 2 (2005): 71-108.

[22] "Spokesman for DPRK Foreign Ministry on Resumption of Six-Party Talks," KCNA, 1 November 2006.

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