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Negotiating With North Korea

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By Selig S. Harrison

In the standard U.S. image, North Korea is a monolithic, Stalin-style dictatorship controlled by one man, Kim Jong Il. But the key reason for North Korean intransigence in the nuclear crisis with the United States is that Kim does not have unchallenged control over foreign and defense policy. The North Korean power structure is deeply divided between pragmatists who favor a nuclear deal with the United States and increasingly assertive hard-liners who argue that a tough posture is needed to stop the Bush administration from pursuing "regime change" in Pyongyang.

My most disturbing finding on a recent visit to North Korea was that a showdown over nuclear policy occurred in early February between the "dealers," led by First Deputy Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju, the principal foreign policy adviser to Kim, and a coalition of hard-line generals and Workers' Party leaders. The hard-liners prevailed. On Feb. 10 Pyongyang made its pronouncement that it has "manufactured nukes" and is a "nuclear weapons state." Then a March 31 declaration served notice that North Korea will no longer discuss dismantling its nuclear weapons capabilities until the United States normalizes economic and diplomatic relations with the Kim regime.

The ascendancy of the hard-liners is the direct result of the Bush administration's ideologically driven North Korea policy and can be reversed only if the United States makes a fresh start attuned to the conciliatory engagement approach now being pursued by South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun, who is scheduled to meet President Bush today.

In contrast to his father, the late Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il is not a revered, charismatic demigod and must accommodate pressures from his generals. As the son of the "Great Leader," he is needed out in front to legitimize the regime, but the armed forces wield growing power, even in the economic sphere.

In the February showdown, I was told by several of those involved, the dealers argued in favor of preserving ambiguity concerning the extent of North Korean nuclear capabilities as part of a continued effort to get economic quid pro quos in return for step-by-step denuclearization.

The hard-liners countered that it would be naive to continue hoping for a beneficial deal with the Bush administration, which in their view is seeking regime change and wants to use the six-party talks in Beijing to drive Pyongyang into a corner. It is demeaning for North Korea to let the United States keep it on the defensive in the six-party talks, they contended, even though Washington has 7,400 operational nuclear weapons of its own. The only self-respecting course for North Korea, they said, would be to rule out any discussion of dismantlement for now and to declare unambiguously that North Korea is already a "nuclear weapons state" in order to make Washington think twice about any military adventure.

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There is a strong mood of wounded pride and angry nationalism in Pyongyang that cuts across both "dealers" and hard-liners. It is particularly galling to North Korean leaders that the United States, oblivious to the sensitivity of Chinese-Korean relations throughout history, is attempting to apply pressure through China and to use it as a diplomatic intermediary.

"This is not the 19th century," one North Korean official commented, an allusion to the servile posture of Korean monarchs toward China during the closing decades of the Yi dynasty, which provoked a strong nationalist reaction. The Kim regime consistently appeals to Korean national pride and has sought friendship with the United States in part as an offset to excessive dependence on its giant neighbor. Thus, attempting to use China to pressure Pyongyang only strengthens the hard-liners.

It was a red flag to the hard-liners when Bush sent a White House emissary to Chinese President Hu Jintao on Feb. 1 with a letter calling for a much tougher posture against Pyongyang. To army generals who think of themselves as the guardians of Korean nationalism, it was necessary to show the world that North Korea would not submit to U.S. pressure applied through a neighboring colossus.

For more than a decade, the dealers have prevailed over the hard-liners with the backing of Kim. They pushed through the 1994 nuclear freeze agreement with the Clinton administration in the face of army opposition. They set the stage for a major missile agreement that fell through in the closing months of Bill Clinton's presidency. They continued to hold their ground in the early months of the Bush administration, strengthened by Colin Powell's statement that he wanted "to pick up where the Clinton people left off." Gradually, however, as one "policy review" in Washington followed another with no outcome, it became clear that the administration was paralyzed between its own dealers and hard-liners. Then came the Oct. 4, 2002, visit of Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly to Pyongyang. Kelly confronted Kang Sok Ju with the accusation that North Korea was cheating on the 1994 accord by building a weapons-grade uranium enrichment facility.

The administration has yet to produce evidence to back up this accusation. Moreover, the director of the South Korean intelligence service, Ko Yong Koo, said on Feb. 24 that Seoul does not share the U.S. assessment, because North Korea "has been unable to obtain the key components needed to build a weapons-grade enrichment facility." China has also expressed skepticism. In any case, it is increasingly clear that the administration made a catastrophic blunder in December 2002 by abrogating the 1994 nuclear freeze, using the uranium accusation as its justification. This gave the hard-liners their rationale for resuming plutonium reprocessing, thus creating the present crisis. A wiser course would have been to pursue the uranium issue through secret diplomacy while keeping the plutonium freeze intact.

After Kelly's visit, the dealers were able to keep the door open, until February, for step-by-step denuclearization culminating in dismantlement. But U.S. insistence on dismantlement at the outset of a denuclearization accord has steadily undermined their position.

For now the hard-liners are in charge in Pyongyang. Pending normalized relations, North Korea is unlikely to reduce its nuclear arsenal, if it actually has one, at any price or to permit the inspections necessary to call its bluff, if it is bluffing. Significantly, however, in my meeting with him, Kang Sok Ju proposed discussions on a new freeze agreement that would rule out further reprocessing of plutonium produced not only by the existing Yongbyon reactor but also by two much bigger

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projected reactors, linked to a formal North Korean commitment not to transfer fissile material to third parties.

This would have to be negotiated in direct talks with the United States, he said, and the U.S. negotiators would have to begin with a formal statement that the United States "will respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and is prepared for peaceful coexistence." Since Kang said that the talks could be secret, there is no reason why the United States should not seriously explore this offer and help to encourage the embattled "dealers" still hoping for normal relations with Washington.This article was published in The Washington Post, July 7, 2005.

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