North Asia Focus:

North Korea's High

Throughout the Cold War, the Korean peninsula occupied a place of honor on the short list of potential flashpoints around the world that could quickly engage the United States in a war. As with the Fulda Gap, the Golan Heights and the Arabian peninsula, the Chorwon and Munsani corridors connecting the two Koreas have for decades remained on America's "watch list" of places where small misunderstandings could escalate to large-scale hostilities.

Since the fall of communism, the American agenda has turned to domestic and international economic matters. To the extent national security has been addressed in a concerted manner, the focus has been on reducing expenditures by the Pentagon, downsizing American forces, recasting the U.S. defense doctrine to reflect the end of bipolar superpower competition, and looking for others -- through the mechanism of the United Nations -- to relieve the U.S. of the burdens of crisis management around the world that had come to be associated with its leadership of the free world.

The administration of President Clinton, one year into office, has been further hampered in the national security area by the failure of his first Secretary of Defense to master his portfolio, and by Senate confirmation problems with some of Mr. Aspin's expanded sub-cabinet policy team early on.

With all of these factors signalling a sharp departure from America's Cold War view of the world, it is perhaps not surprising that North Korea's continuing threat to the stability of north Asia should have emerged as a serious challenge to President Clinton's stewardship of American foreign policy.

North Korea's Challenge

With so many former adversaries opening their political systems and economies to the Western democracies in just a few short years, observers could be forgiven for overlooking the continued existence of a regime in Pyongyang that has spelled trouble for the Republic of Korea (ROK) and its American ally since the peninsula was divided in 1945.

The "Great Leader," eighty-one year-old Kim Il Sung and his son and heir, "Dear Leader" Kim Jong Il, 51, have a long history of fomenting serious trouble -- from the military lunge southward across the 38th Parallel in June of 1950, launching the Korean War, to the seizing of the USS *Pueblo* in 1968, to the bombing of half of the ROK Cabinet visiting Rangoon in 1983, to the destruction of a ROK civilian airliner in 1987. Along the way, there have been numerous attacks on American soldiers in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). North Korea's armed forces have been built up in size and firepower and menacingly deployed near the DMZ, affording Seoul little warning of attack.

Against the backdrop of this very troublesome history, Pyongyang has in recent years raised concern over its nuclear activities, principally located at Yongbyon. Suspicion that the North Koreans may have reprocessed spent plutonium as part of a covert nuclear weapons program has prompted international demands to inspect the suspect facilities. The North Koreans have reacted negatively to this pressure, placing a growing onus on the international community, principally the United States, to redouble its efforts to contain the threat.

The Bush Administration Approach

Under President Bush, mid-level officials familiar with the issue in the State Department, Pentagon and National Security Council staff approached the problem of North Korea by trying to focus on two broad, defining questions: What does the U.S. want from North Korea? And what "price" is the U.S. prepared to pay to get it?

The Bush policy concept was that America's concerns about North Korea's nuclear program were but one element in the overall approach to the future of the Korean peninsula, which in turn was regarded as one key element of the long-term East Asian security equation. The Bush administration saw the nuclear problem as one of several manifestations of North Korea's unacceptable behavior. The overarching US concern was 40 years of aberrant, unpredictable and aggressive behavior by North Korea, and its massive forward military deployments.

Believing that an appropriate first step in encouraging positive North Korean behavior was to remove any obvious excuses for non-cooperation, the Bush administration worked with the ROK to bring about the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons from ROK territory, after which the North permitted the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to visit North Korean facilities in Yongbyon. The next month, a comprehensive set of North-South understandings was reached.

After these announcements in November and December of 1991, however, there was no further progress between the two Koreas. In early 1992 Pyongyang agreed -- seven years after signing the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) -- to permit regular inspections of seven sites at the Yongbyon complex. However, once these inspections detected the likelihood of undisclosed nuclear reprocessing activity, and intelligence sources reportedly discovered two apparent undeclared nuclear

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waste sites, the North Koreans limited the IAEA's access, and ultimately announced an intent to pull out of the NPT.

The Clinton Administration Approach

President Clinton was faced with the North Korean challenge to the non-proliferation regime early in his administration. When the North Koreans successfully tested the intermediate-range *Nodong-1* missile over the Sea of Japan in the spring of 1993, the security implications of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il controlling deliverable nuclear weapons aimed at the ROK and Japan, two non-nuclear-armed treaty allies of the United States, became a priority concern to Washington.

Yet, by focusing so narrowly on the nuclear non-proliferation issue, the Clinton administration has compromised its ability to conduct a policy on the larger matter of future North-South relations, all initiative on which is now held hostage to progress on the nuclear issue. While undoubtedly consulting with Seoul and, one hopes, Japan, the administration has nevertheless turned this problem into a Washington-Pyongyang issue, creating the dynamics of a showdown.

North Korea has received some benefits already for its bellicosity. US officials have been meeting North Korean officials regularly, according a measure of legitimacy and respectability to this despotic regime. The Americans have reportedly offered or suggested the possibility of offering important political and economic concessions, and used the major US-ROK annual military exercise *Team Spirit* as a bargaining chip, all to induce North Korea to meet its obligations in the nuclear area and resume its diplomatic process with the ROK.

The tensions from this standoff have generated debate over whether President Clinton is being tough enough. Bush Administration officials were also willing to consider cancelling *Team Spirit* and permitting North Korean officials to inspect sites in the South -- if sufficient reciprocal measures were forthcoming from Pyongyang. Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense in the Bush Administration, and Brent Scowcroft, President Bush's National Security Advisor, have criticized the Clinton approach as too conciliatory. In a spectacle not seen in many years, the US finds itself being coached by others, in this case the ROK, to maintain a tough stance on a national security issue. If the issue moves to the UN Security Council, it will likely be at the behest of the IAEA rather than the White House.

Keeping the Larger Security Picture in Focus

The prospect that North Korea may be developing one or more usable nuclear weapons is but one facet of a security mosaic that the United States will mishandle at its peril. The US maintains 35,000 forces on the Korean peninsula, and continues to shield Japan from nuclear blackmail, both arrangements reflecting treaty alliance understandings that are treated as sacrosanct by these allies. Thus, how today's tensions are resolved will have direct and immediate consequences for US national security. Moreover, concerns about the countries neighboring the Korean peninsula add greatly to the stakes of an already-volatile situation.

Under any circumstance, China will weigh heavily in the region's security outlook. In the most stable scenario of gradual and peaceful evolution, at the dawn of the 21st century the US and its allies will face, for the first time ever, a politically unified, economically robust and militarily strong China -- a superpower. China's economy will inevitably constitute a rival to Japanese industry throughout Asia.

The stirrings of nationalism and even imperial recidivism in Russia of late will also not have gone unnoticed in East Asia. Resurgent militarism in Russia, at a minimum, could spur a destabilizing new military buildup throughout the area.

Japan, which has relied entirely on US protection in a tense region for four decades, would see itself as threatened by Korean reunification if nuclear weapons were in the equation. Japan has pledged to support extension of the NPT in 1995, but faced with potential threats emanating from three strong neighbors, it could conceivably reassess its total reliance on American leadership in securing the peace.

That is why there is more at stake for the United States in the North Korean crisis than a few crude, untested nuclear devices of dubious value in the hands of a backward dictatorship. What is called for is an appreciation of how the peace was kept throughout this region in the past, a recognition of how it might come apart in the future, and an affirmation that the US will continue to support a defense posture and a foreign policy designed to promote stability across the board in north Asia.

Provided we act vigorously and purposefully to keep Asian defense relationships in good working order, we and our allies will be able to contain and counter any threat emanating from North Korea without doing violence to the NPT. The Cold War may be over, but this is one crisis that the United States cannot wish away.

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