

Thomas Hubbard
Senior Director for Asia, McLarty Associates
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Denuclearization: A Better Option for North Korea's Security

I have been deeply involved in North Korea affairs for over 15 years, first as a senior official in the East Asia Bureau in the State Department during the Clinton Administration, later as Ambassador to South Korea under the Bush Administration, and more recently as a member of the private sector often asked to comment on North Korean matters. Throughout this period the central U.S. objective has been a verifiable end to North Korea's nuclear weapons programs. We have seen many ups and downs in the various forms of negotiations that have been tried since 1992, when then Under Secretary of State Arnold Kanter held the first direct talks with a senior North Korean official. As a senior member of the Clinton Administration delegation led by Robert Gallucci that first sat down with a DPRK delegation in New York in June 1993, I am deeply frustrated to have to acknowledge that the problem has grown worse despite all of our efforts. The North Korean threat that we face in 2009 is significantly more serious than the one we confronted in the early 1990's. Whereas we suspected that the North Koreans had squirreled away enough plutonium for one, maybe two, nuclear weapons when they balked at International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections in 1993, sixteen years later we know that they have substantially more. They have conducted two underground nuclear explosions and have tested a range of ballistic missiles that could become delivery systems. Earlier agreements to forego nuclear weapons notwithstanding, the DPRK's nuclear weapons programs are once again up and running. The North Koreans now boast of their nuclear "deterrent" and maintain that they are willing to return to the negotiating table only if their status as a nuclear weapons state is recognized.

In the wake of North Korea's second nuclear test and successive missile tests, I have been asked for my assessment of the motivations behind these and other provocative actions. It goes without saying that no one really knows what goes on behind the walls of one of the most isolated and secretive nations in the world, but we must assume that regime survival is Kim Jong-Il's most fundamental objective and that he sees the United States and its alliance with South Korea as the primary threat to his hold on power. For the past 15 years, we have tended to see North Korea's provocative behavior as a negotiating tactic aimed primarily at attracting our attention – at drawing the United States into bilateral negotiations in which we would offer security assurances and financial aid in exchange for North Korean promises to give its nuclear programs. That was probably a correct assessment until recently and remains one of the DPRK's important aims at the outset of a new U.S. Administration. However, I believe we have entered into a new situation in which the DPRK leadership is motivated as much by domestic factors as by an interest in manipulating the United States.

What has changed? First and foremost, having suffering a debilitating stroke at the age of 67, Kim Jong-Il is bound to be thinking about his legacy and about leadership succession.

There are widespread reports that he has chosen his 27 year-old youngest son to be his successor. It may be that he has come to see his nuclear and missile programs less as a bargaining chip than as his best security option – a legacy of his leadership that will ensure the survival of a successor regime and give the DPRK a continuing voice in world affairs despite its economic failures. Following the collapse of its principal international benefactor, the Soviet Union, in the early 1990's, the DPRK leadership appeared to signal that it saw a closer relationship with the United States as the best way to ensure regime survival. It also pursued warmer relations with South Korea, with whom it signed a mutual denuclearization agreement in 1992. As it enters a difficult transition period, the DPRK appears to have at least temporarily abandoned that approach in favor of a return to its traditional approach of self-isolation, this time armed with a demonstrated, albeit rudimentary, nuclear capability.

If the DPRK leadership is determined to turn its back on the world, it is a profound tragedy for the people of North Korea, since only by joining the international community can they gain the assistance and technology they need to overcome their enormous economic challenges. Through dialogue in various venues, the U.S. and its partners in the region have long offered such assistance in exchange for the DPRK's abandonment of its nuclear programs. Sadly, the DPRK has consistently failed to abide by its commitments, obviously hedging its bet on a strategic relationship with the U.S. by seeking to hold onto its nuclear card as long as possible. I would not argue that successive U.S. Administrations and our allies have always been wise or consistent in their approach to North Korea. Mutual confidence has been hard to build. However, the North Korean regime has only itself to blame for the suffering of its people. By failing to avail itself of the benefits that were offered in the Six Party talks at the end of the Bush Administration and, then, by rejecting the hand that was extended by the Obama Administration, the DPRK leadership has gone out of its way to reject its best hope for security and prosperity.

Where, then, should we go from here? I agree with the basic approach being followed by the Obama Administration. First and foremost, we must not recognize the DPRK as a permanent nuclear power. Some prominent Americans have argued that nuclear weapons are now a fact of life in North Korea, too valuable for the regime to ever give up. They argue that talks are futile. We should instead build missile defenses and isolate the DPRK, waiting for eventual Korean unification to solve the nuclear problem for us. I disagree with that view. While the potential of the DPRK actually using nuclear weapons seems remote, the risk of transfer to other dangerous countries or groups is such that we cannot rely entirely on deterrence and containment. Moreover, acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state without efforts to change things would be deeply alarming to some of our closest allies and could well lead to a regional arms race. While recognizing that quick success is unlikely, we need to vigorously pursue a proactive policy aimed at verifiable denuclearization.

A willingness to engage North Korea directly, combined with pressure, is the best way forward. North Korea's defiance of the international community has been costly. One result of North Korea's outrageous recent behavior has been to bring the other partners in the Six-Party talks closer together. When President Obama and ROK President Lee Myung-bak meet this week in Washington they will display the most unified front that we have achieved since our two countries began direct dialog with the North on nuclear issues. Agreeing that North Korea's challenge to the international community must have consequences, China and Russia supported a

strong UN Security Council resolution condemning North Korea's behavior in no uncertain terms and calling for concrete steps to address the proliferation issue by curbing North Korea's ability to buy and sell nuclear and other arms. The Six-Party talks, which engage the countries with greatest interest and potential influence over North Korea at the same table, remains the best venue for future talks, and we should resist North Korean efforts to destroy the process. While it may take some time to get back to the negotiating table, all parties need to use all the influence at their disposal to convince the North Korean leadership that denuclearization is their best route to future stability.

Since the beginning of dialogue with North Korea, we have looked for clear signals of whether the DPRK leadership has made a strategic decision to give up its nuclear weapons programs. Several times the DPRK has proclaimed its willingness to do so, but insisted upon a phased process that has enabled it to obtain assurances and benefits without taking irrevocable steps to end the weapons capability. When we get back to the negotiating table, as I believe we will after the North Korean leadership situation stabilizes, we will need to insist upon a broader approach that will truly test North Korea's strategic intention from the outset. I personally doubt that Kim Jong-Il has ever made a definitive decision to give up his nuclear card, but I am not yet convinced that we cannot create circumstances in which Kim Jong-Il or his successor will conclude that his best interests lie in joining, rather than confronting, the international community. If the United States, Japan, South Korea, China and Russia continue to stand together as they did last week at the UN, I believe we have a chance to create circumstances in which leaders in Pyongyang will see denuclearization as the best option for their country's future..