



NUCLEAR CRISIS ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA: SLEEPWALKING INTO NUCLEAR HELL?

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Over the last three decades, the North Korean nuclear problem has dramatically worsened. Often a crisis situation was sparked by North Korea's provocative behaviors and deescalated by a subsequent diplomatic initiative. In-between these crisis-diplomacy cycles, strengthened deterrence and international sanctions took over to counter North Korea's enhanced capabilities.

In this essay, I take a look back at the 2002 nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula and draw key lessons, from my own experience as a senior diplomat, for the road ahead toward renewed diplomacy and the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.

The 2002 North Korean Nuclear Crisis

The second of the many nuclear crises on the Korean Peninsula began in earnest with the visit of the United States delegation to North Korea in September 2002. This delegation was led by Jim Kelly, then US Assistant Secretary of State in the George W Bush administration.

The Bush administration suspected North Korea was in possible breach of the 1994 [Geneva Agreement](#) by secretive purchases of uranium enrichment devices from black markets. It was aimed at freezing North Korea's plutonium nuclear program in exchange for aid and energy assistance including a construction project of light water nuclear reactors in North Korea.

The Agreement had been implemented relatively well, until these efforts were dealt a serious damaging blow by North Korea's surprising admission, to the visiting US delegation, of its secretive enrichment program. A tit-for-tat chain reaction from the United States and North Korea eventually led to the collapse of the Geneva Agreement.

As a senior diplomat, I was involved in the policy consultations with the United States and other partners. At the time, South Korea failed to impress upon the Bush administration that it would be far better to keep the Agreement alive while pressuring North Korea to give up on the enrichment program on legal grounds, rather than allowing

the violator off the legal hook. Unfortunately, eight years of efforts under the Agreement were brought to an abrupt halt. Unsurprisingly, North Korea ratcheted up its provocations through nuclear weapon tests and upgraded missile launches, to become the only country to conduct such tests in the 21st century.

Ironically, the intensifying crisis helped South Korea to persuade the Bush administration to try a new multinational framework differentiated from the bilateral Geneva Agreement. That's how the Six Party Talks were initiated for crisis management and it led to the [2005 Joint Statement](#).

Three Lessons From the Crisis Experience

First and foremost, through subsequent ups and downs, it became clear to South Korea and the United States – the two main stakeholders – that diplomacy may not be the preferred option but it is the least bad one, in comparison to other options which should be resorted to after diplomacy is exhausted.

Second, South Korea and the United States are likely to have differences in their respective positions vis-à-vis North Korea corresponding to their geopolitical priorities and domestic political contexts. But these differences are not necessarily a negative obstacle and through close coordination, these can be used for a division of labor as sort of a good and a bad cop in negotiating with the North Korean regime.

Finally, as the directly concerned party, South Korea must take the lead in devising any new diplomatic initiative on North Korea. Creative thinking and patient pursuit based on bipartisan domestic support are required to change North Korea's calculation and bring all interested parties on board.

Tasks Ahead for South Korea

Unfortunately, the past diplomatic efforts have not stopped North Korea's nuclear pursuits. To the contrary, North Korean warheads and delivery capabilities have grown exponentially, both in quantity and quality. A fatigue has set into the denuclearisation efforts, which disguises inaction as strategic patience. The Korean Peninsula stands as not only the hardest case of denuclearisation but also as a possible trigger of nuclear confrontation into which the major powers may be inadvertently drawn by misunderstanding or miscommunication.

Moreover, the heightened public frustration has incited greater public support for South Korea's independent nuclear weapon option. If South Korea chooses to go nuclear, it would be catastrophic not only for South Korea's international standing but also for the integrity of the NPT framework, and therefore it must be prevented at all cost.

Status quo is not tenable for South Korea as far as North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities are concerned, especially as time is not on the South Korea's side. Tensions are bound to rise if North Korea crosses another milestone with miniaturising nuclear

warheads or acquiring atmospheric reentry technology. Public pressure for South Korea to go nuclear will also rise.

Diplomacy must be reactivated and backed by robust deterrence under the US nuclear umbrella and the threats of sanctions on North Korea. Any new diplomatic initiative must be closely coordinated with the United States with a clear division of roles in consultation with Japan, China, Russia and other partners.

The road ahead for renewed diplomacy is full of challenges and uncertainty, but we cannot afford another failure. South Korea must be creative and proactive in charting a new course, to avoid sleepwalking into nuclear hell.

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