

The Nuclear North: Why U.S. Policy to North Korea Is Failing and What to Do About It

North Korea defiantly launched a rocket on December 12th, the latest iteration in a series of actions deemed belligerent by the United States, the UN and other major world powers.¹ The United States responded with its typical calls for more sanctions and other actions that would isolate the North. These actions have often been criticized as ineffective, and these concerns are warranted as North Korea has tested several nuclear weapons in addition to other states like Iran seemingly close to doing the same. Fortunately, there are things the United States and other major powers dealing with North Korea can do to convince this nation to end their nuclear program and not continue the long string of empty promises that have been prevalent from the North for so long.

In 1994, after a North Korean threat to withdraw from the NPT, the United States and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework that required the North to cease construction and operation of nuclear reactors in exchange for proliferation-resistant power reactors.² Diplomatic complications quickly ensued, however, with missile tests like the three-stage Taepo Dong-1 rocket in 1998 and expulsion of IAEA inspectors at the end of 2002. In 2006, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1695 calling an object the DPRK claimed was a satellite in the 1998 launch “an object propelled by a missile” and Resolution 1718 demanding an end to the DPRK's

-
- 1 “North Korea Rocket Launch: Long-Range Missile Fired, South Korean Defense Ministry Confirms,” Huffington Post, accessed January 9, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/11/north-korea-rocket-launch-2012_n_2280964.html.
 - 2 “Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy,” *Arms Control Association*, accessed September 13, 2012, <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron>.

nuclear program and instituting tough economic sanctions.³ The IAEA also expressed concern at the DPRK shortly after being expelled.⁴

These challenges demonstrate the lack of effectiveness many international institutions and states suffer when working with states since they require cooperation and adherence from many states simultaneously to be effective. However, many states decide to cheat when others play by the rules, putting themselves ahead according to standard game theory like the “Prisoner’s Dilemma”. The DPRK demonstrated this in the 1990s through today by repeatedly renegeing on prior commitments. Like Lucy fooling Charlie Brown with her football, the DPRK has outmaneuvered the UN, US and other states time and time again over the past twenty years on the nuclear issue. For example, they signed the NPT in 1985 only to back out in 2003 after having already flirted with doing so ten years earlier.⁵ History is currently repeating itself in Iran, as sanctions and attempts at negotiations have failed at curbing both North Korea’s and Iran’s uranium enrichment and nuclear proliferation activities. Evidence gathered by the IAEA suggests that Iran is likely to be developing an implosion nuclear device that could be fitted onto a missile.⁶

The ultimate reason for the failure of the international community to respond to these and other states adequately on the nuclear issue is because a rogue state can renege on a commitment later even if they already have the aid or other incentives that the other state promised. It must be

3 “U.S., Allies Warn Against NK Space Launch,” *Arms Control Association*, accessed September 14, 2012, <http://www.armscontrol.org/print/3596>.

4 “Report by the Director General on the implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement between the Agency and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” *IAEA*, accessed September 14, 2012, <http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/mediaadvisory/2003/gov2003-3.pdf>.

5 “Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy,” *Arms Control Association*, accessed September 13, 2012, <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron>.

6 “Inspectors Pierce Iran’s Cloak of Nuclear Secrecy,” *New York Times*, accessed September 13, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/science/31nuke.html>.

in the state's interest not to cheat. If a state believes its security is best served through pursuit of a nuclear weapon, it will stop at almost nothing to obtain one.

This emphasis on self-interest answers a common rebuttal to apologists of diplomats engaging states like the DPRK and Iran: Aren't what these diplomats doing better than nothing? Although sanctions and other penalties have been shown to be ineffective, is it not better than resting on one's laurels? Take the argument that the DPRK or Iran would never actually use nukes because it would be suicide to do so: Other nuclear states like the US or Israel could wipe them off the map with their own nuclear arsenals. The question that follows is: Why would they get them in the first place? The answer is that having a nuclear program brings the major powers (particularly the US) to the table. The US has given the DPRK tons of food aid in an attempt to curb the latter's nuclear program.⁷ Much of this aid would not have arrived had the DPRK not developed nuclear weapons, as the US would have remained antagonistic towards the DPRK rather than use the carrot and stick approach to nuclear non-proliferation.

Instead of the give-and-take approach hitherto employed by the international community that delivers food aid in exchange for empty promises of ceasing nuclear proliferation, the United States and other involved actors should embrace a win-win approach that ensures the best outcomes for both sides. In the instance of North Korea and the United States, the latter should guarantee that diplomatic relations and food aid will continue unabated if North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons. The North must also feel that their security is not at risk by giving up nuclear weapons. Instead of having a weapon that will result in suicide for the nation if actually used but would exist simply as a scare tactic for more developed states who also have these

⁷ "US: North Korea suspends nuclear activities, takes food aid," *Fox News*, accessed September 14, 2012, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/02/29/us-north-korea-suspends-nuclear-activities/>.

weapons, the North could be more respected for not having nuclear weapons and give other states less desire to attack them in the first place.

By avoiding the security dilemma that inevitably follows from new states gaining nuclear weapons, especially states like North Korea that are diametrically different than the United States and other major powers in countless ways, there will be a greater promise of peace and security overall and both sides will win. It is the duty of every diplomat engaging North Korea to take this into account when deciding whether to take the worn-out path that has seen endless failures or blaze a new trail towards peace and nuclear security.