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# North Korea:
## Sliding towards the abyss

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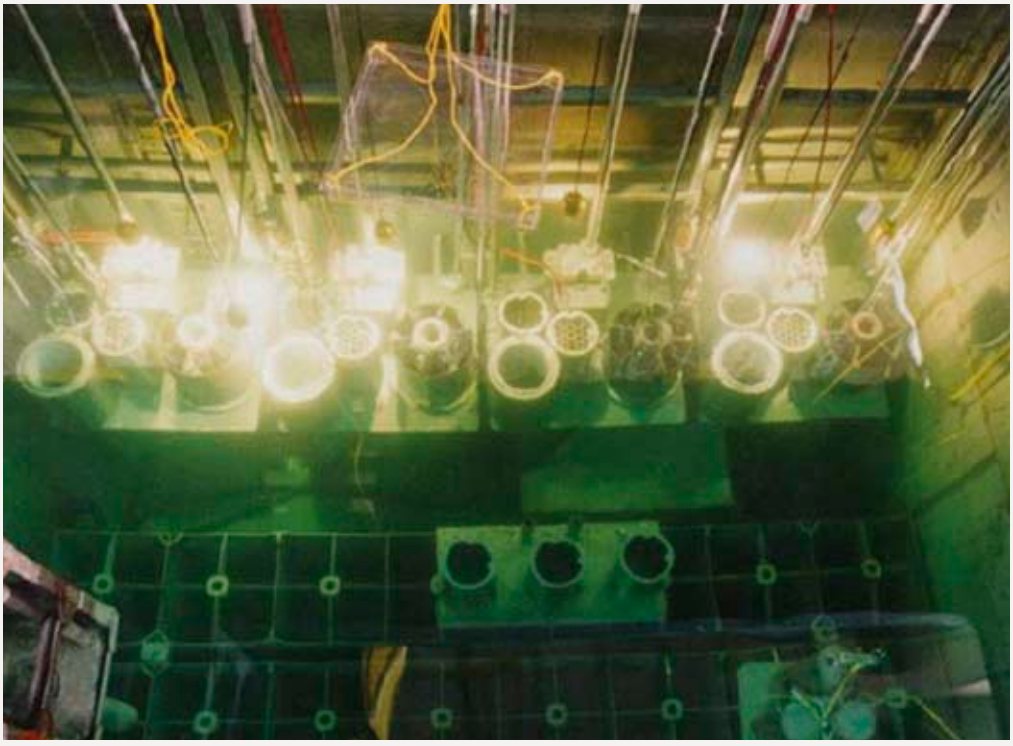
With the world's attention currently riveted on the Global Financial Crisis, ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the broader counter-terrorist effort, recent hostilities over Gaza, the advent of a new administration in the United States, China's rise, and Iran's apparent interest in developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities in the Middle East, it's no surprise North Korea has slipped off the international radar screen.

But, as Hillary Clinton recently pointed out, North Korea remains a key challenge for regional security. True, some progress has been made at the Six-Party Talks, particularly in the wake of the North's nuclear test in late 2006, which encouraged the Chinese to become more 'engaged' on the nuclear issue. Still, the accords achieved in the talks are fragile and incomplete, and the North's commitment to full denuclearisation suspect.



North Korea's spent nuclear fuel rods kept in a cooling pond are seen at the nuclear facilities in Yongbyon, North Korea in this 1996 file photo, released from Yonhap, 7 February 2003. AP/ Yonhap via AAP © 2003 Associated Press

Pyongyang's recent flurry of adventurism—including its abandonment of its military confidence-building measures negotiated with South Korea since 1991, a claim that it has 'weaponised' all its plutonium stocks, and apparent preparations for a new long-range ballistic missile test (or space launch)—seems intended to reinforce the current international picture of North Korean behaviour: that the North will behave badly unless it is paid to behave better. Its adventurism is also intended to attract President Obama's attention, and to convince him that his administration must engage quickly with the issues surrounding the North Korean nuclear program. And it is intended, of course, to persuade others—inside North Korea as well as outside—that Kim Jong-Il's recent health worries are now past, and that the 'Dear Leader' is once more at the helm. In short, recent events are an attempt by the North to build a picture of continuity: continuity in North Korean behaviour ('foot-stomping' as 'performance art' in the colourful description of one journalist[1]); continuity in a US policy of engaging the North; and continuity in the existing pattern of North Korean leadership.

Pyongyang is keen to rebuild that sense of continuity, because Kim Jong-Il's recent stroke suggested the entire edifice could crumble quickly. A recent assessment by the Council on Foreign Relations in New York has noted that North Korea may be sliding—much earlier than expected—into a leadership crisis, adding a new layer of concern and unpredictability to events both inside the country itself and more broadly across Northeast Asia.[2] Indeed, any further health crisis for Kim Jong-Il would see this issue return to the forefront of international policy attention.

## What do we know about modern North Korea?

North Korea is a closed, opaque political system. In large part because of its personality-cult style of governance, the country is typically seen abroad as an incarnation of its leader, a figure 'enigmatic, reclusive—part fox, part oddball.'[3] Because of that style of governance, we know rather less than we would like about the relative strengths of the institutions underpinning political power within the North Korean system. Politics in Pyongyang is more about personalities and informal networks, than it is about institutions and office, so it is hard to be specific about how power might devolve were Kim Jong-Il—or even the entire Kim family—to be less dominant on the scene.

*What we do know is that North Korea has seen its fortunes slip profoundly over recent decades.*

What we do know is that North Korea has seen its fortunes slip profoundly over recent decades. As RAND analyst William Overholt wrote, the North has suffered 'economic defeat, diplomatic defeat, and balance-of-military-power defeat.'[4] It has seen South Korea surge ahead of it economically; seen its old allies, China and Russia, turn their attention elsewhere; and seen South Korea increasingly out-point it in terms of military weapons and capabilities. A straightforward measure of the extent of North Korea's economic defeat can be gleaned from a comparison of the two Koreas' GDPs: in 2007, the South's GDP was approximately thirty times larger than the North's.[5]

Still, North Korea endures, if not prettily. It is held upright by a combination of factors: a draconian political system, its neighbours' unwillingness to see it fail, and a regime content to raise revenue in unsavoury ways. The regime has dug itself in for the long haul, suppressing dissent and tempering engagement in favour of regime survival. As one commentator has noted, the regime seems to survive best in isolation.[6] It has learned, too, to exploit its neighbours' fears; learned that holding its breath until it turns blue in the face is a strategy that can sometimes bring surprising rewards. South Korea, Japan and China are all anxious about stability on the Korean peninsula: each worries about the alternatives to the current order there, and each has reasons to prop up the current North Korean system, unpalatable though it is, on the-devil-you-know principle. Finally, Kim Jong-Il's regime endures because it has been willing to find partners in the less reputable suburbs of international society, recently transferring nuclear expertise to Syria, and—earlier—partnering with transnational criminal organisations to raise revenue.

*South Korea, Japan and China are all anxious about stability on the Korean peninsula…*

What does the future hold for North Korea? The answer is far from clear. The country remains a closed society, locked away from the outside world. If we look beyond the nuclear program, the society is technologically dormant. Chinese scholars who have ventured out into the countryside in the North Korean provinces close to the Chinese border say stone huts there resemble those of the 13th century, lacking even glass in their windows. A bottom-up revolution, similar to the 'coloured' revolutions of other parts of the former communist world, seems distant. So too does reunification. Both those alternatives would become more plausible if the regime itself were gravely weakened. In short, the political system in North Korea must rot from the head down if change is to occur.

## A leadership crisis?

But the timeless quality that seems to characterise North Korean society and politics may change abruptly. The continuing deterioration in Kim Jong-Il's health makes the current circumstances special. The Kims have ruled North Korea for two generations. We speculate about the consequences that a leadership crisis might have, not only for the North Korean nuclear program and the Six-Party Talks, but also for stability in Northeast Asia.

This paper does not seek to canvass all the possible permutations for North Korea's future, but rather focuses on the issue of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) leadership. Much of the fate of North Korean politics turns on the ability of the existing elite to effect a stable political succession. Three leadership outcomes seem more likely than others—a protracted period of rule by a more incapacitated leader relying more heavily on family support; an actual dynastic succession (whereby formal power transfers to one of Kim Jong-Il's three sons or brother-in-law); or a period of collective rule by a small group drawn from the current elite. The first two scenarios presuppose a North Korea still ruled by the Kims; the third assumes we are moving beyond that era. Under any of the scenarios, it is possible that we might see contested leadership decisions or, more importantly, contested succession.

## Continued rule by Kim Jong-Il?

On 9 September 2008 North Koreans celebrated the 60th anniversary of the nation. Kim Jong-Il's failure to attend the celebration parade fanned international concern regarding his health, a possible leadership succession in Pyongyang, and the prospects for stability on the Korean peninsula.

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Rumours of Kim Jong-Il's declining health have circulated for several years: the Dear Leader is reported to be suffering from high blood pressure, advanced diabetes and heart disease. He is suspected to have undergone at least one heart procedure in 2007, a second in 2008, and seems to have had a stroke last August. Some reports suggest the stroke required surgery, but we are unable to assess independently the severity of Kim's health problems.

While those reports have been vigorously denied by North Korea as attempts at an international conspiracy, Kim Jong-Il was conspicuously absent from important Communist Party events for over fifty days. The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) subsequently reported a series of 'public appearances' by Kim Jong-Il—the first to 'enjoy a student football match' on 6 October, and several visits to Korean People's Army (KPA) facilities in the following weeks. However, those reports (and a series of still photographs of Kim with no specific place or date markings) merely heightened speculation over the health of the leader and the future of Asia's last dynastic communist state. A meeting between Kim and a Chinese senior official on 23 January 2009 seems to have been the first instance of Kim's return to the leadership role proper since August.

A leadership transition assumes that Kim Jong-Il's death is a near-term event: that bedside leadership gives way relatively rapidly to graveside leadership, as one critic put it. While several factors point to a downward health trajectory, mere illness would not preclude the possibility of Kim Jong-Il's continued rule for some years yet. Those years would show us a physically less capable North Korean leader, sometimes an incapacitated and medicated one, but a leader still in control of key policy decisions. Kim Jong-Il turned 67 on 16 February 2009. He isn't the world's oldest leader. And he wouldn't be the first ageing authoritarian leader to cling to power despite illness. Moreover, the political advantages of continuing down this path are obvious: in particular, it would avoid a possibly contentious transition from one leader to another. So much, of course, turns upon just how ill Kim Jong-Il actually is. Still, even if he is merely sick, a sudden medical trauma, like another stroke, could remove him swiftly from the scene.

## Continued rule by the family?

If the Dear Leader's time at the helm is coming to an end, we face the looming challenge of political succession in one of the world's least understood countries. Rumours over the Christmas–New Year period suggested that Kim Jong-Il had, in fact, nominated his third son as his formal successor. Those reports seemed to emanate from South Korean intelligence reports, and we have seen no convincing evidence that they are true: certainly no formal campaign to 'glorify' Kim Jong-Un is underway, as one might expect were he the chosen one. And the first son has publicly disavowed that any formal succession plan has been decided.

Leadership transition in an authoritarian state is problematic at best. The leadership transfer from Kim Il-Sung to his son Kim Jong-Il in 1994 is the only power transition to have occurred

in North Korea since division of the peninsula at the 38th parallel, so the process can hardly be described as institutionalised. Can the DPRK state survive another such dynastic leadership transition? So far, the North Korean regime has not initiated any of the elaborate and lengthy processes that were followed for Kim Jong-Il's rise to power.

Kim Jong-Il was groomed by his father for over twenty years before taking over the leadership of the country. He got his first government job with the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) Central Committee's Organisation Bureau in 1964 after graduating from the Kim Il-Sung University. The following ten years saw Kim Jong-Il gain formative experiences in government. He progressed quickly up the government chain in two core KWP departments before being appointed to the powerful position of KWP secretary in charge of organisation and propaganda and agitation in 1973. This role effectively designated Kim Jong-Il as heir apparent to the leadership and gave him important power over the party's organisational affairs. Concurrently, the government was elevating the reputation and public images of both Kim Jong-Il and his mother, Kim Jong-Sook, in line with Confucian values of ideal family life.

Although there were some signs of a similar propaganda campaign for Koh Yong-Hui (mother of Kim Jong-Il's two younger sons) in 2002–03, that campaign stopped abruptly with her death in 2004. There has been no equivalent campaign to strengthen the transition prospects of any of Kim Jong-Il's sons—Kim Jong-Nam (born 1971), Kim Jong-Chol (born 1981) and Kim Jong-Un (born 1983).

If it is true that current North Korean politics are family politics, then existing power relationships are complicated and uncertain. Those relationships mirror Kim Jong-Il's hedonistic lifestyle, in which his children (daughters as well as sons) have been the offspring of different unions. Kim Jong-Nam is the son of Son Hye Rim, a film actress and famous beauty, who was married with a child when Kim Jong-Il fell in love with her in the late 1960s. Kim Il-Sung disapproved of her due to her family background—her parents, although committed communists, were from the South. She was sidelined in the 1970s, lived in Moscow after a mental breakdown in the 1980s, and died there in 2002.[7]

Koh Yong-Hui is mother to both of Kim Jong-Ils two younger sons. A dancer, born in Japan to a family of ethnic Koreans, Koh met Kim in the mid-1970s, and reports suggest she remained the major person in his private life until her sudden death in 2004. Some analysts believe that her advocacy of her own sons had much to do with the marginalisation of the first son, and that since her death the prospects of the younger sons have diminished. In truth, it is hard to tell. Reports in mid-2008 suggested Kim Ok (sometimes described as Kim Jong-Il's 'fourth wife', and his personal secretary since the 1980s) was then pushing the cause of the

A man, Kyodo News said, believed to be Kim Jong-Nam, eldest son of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-Il is surrounded by media upon arrival from Macau at Beijing airport in Beijing, China, Sunday, 11 February 2007. His appearance in Beijing sparked interest among North Korea watchers, coming as the United States and North Korea were meeting across town over North Korea's nuclear weapons programs. AP/Kyodo News via AAP © 2007 Associated Press

youngest son, seeing a regency role for herself in that process.

Apart from the political competition of mothers and 'wives', we have the deeds of the sons themselves. Kim Jong-Nam fell out of favour in 2001 when caught trying to enter Japan on a forged Dominican Republic passport. He was deported to China and has lived in Macau since the incident. The second son is presently a member of the KWP Central Committee Leadership Division, in the propaganda department. But he has been criticised by Kim Jong-Il for being too effeminate. The youngest son has held no important positions in government, although he is said to closely resemble his father in many ways (including his physical frame), giving him some appeal as a successor.

Alternatively, and still within the family, Kim Jong-Il's brother-in-law, Jang Song-Taek, recently played a key role as caretaker of the DPRK regime while Kim Jong-Il was ill. Considered Kim Jong-Il's right hand man until he was purged in late 2004 for an alleged bid to enhance his own power, Jang Song-Taek was reinstated in late 2005 and was appointed to the important position as KWP First Deputy Chief of Public Labour in 2007. He might well have claims upon the leadership position in his own right.

*Concerns regarding leadership succession are magnified by arguments concerning Kim Jong-Il's strength as a leader.*

Concerns regarding leadership succession are magnified by arguments concerning Kim Jong-Il's strength as a leader. Although some Chinese interlocutors tell us that Kim Jong-Il is 'tougher than his old man', some analysts believe his rule has been dependent upon a delicately crafted balance between competing factions in North Korean politics.[8] And Rudiger Frank, for example, argues that Kim Jong-Il has been so successful in raising and maintaining the image and status of Kim Il-Sung as the 'eternal president' that he has allowed himself to slip into the Great Leader's shadows. With this in mind, Frank argues that Kim Jong-Il lacks the power and strength as a leader to legitimately name a successor from within the family without challenge.

The complex family relations and the questions over Kim Jong-Il's strength might make it seem that dynastic succession is all but impossible. Not so. Indeed, the best estimate of knowledgeable specialists on North Korean politics, like Tong Kim, a research professor at Korea University, is that 'a father to son succession is most likely to be repeated, based on a best understanding of North Korean politics and a long history of Korean dynasties.'[9] But unless a clear succession order is established, it seems any such process could be competitive, and possibly inconclusive.

## Collective leadership?

The lack of a current succession plan and Kim Jong-Il's mounting health pressures make it a genuine possibility that a familial line of succession won't endure in North Korea. So what's the next most likely alternative? Although Tong Kim states that 'collective leadership has no successful precedence in the Korean history of national governance',[10] such an option might become more attractive were a succession to be forced suddenly upon the country. During his reign, Kim Jong-Il has demonstrated considerable success at controlling the divisions of power between and within the highest government departments and organs. Effectively limiting any competition for the leadership and stifling the rise of any ambitious challenger, he has created a system where a degree

of cooperation amongst a small group of the elite is now almost essential for future policy-shaping.

*... after Kim Jong-Il it is likely that no single individual will be in a position to take complete control of the country.*

In a country of strict control, Kim Jong-Il has combated challenges to his central power by dividing power within the three highest government organs—the National Defence Commission, the Korean Workers Party and the Cabinet. While individual power is based on proximity to Kim Jong-Il or membership of these government institutions, the role of each government office is strictly limited so as to avoid any one individual acquiring excessive power. Additionally Kim has prohibited the formation of personal, regional or ideological groupings within the leadership. Therefore, after Kim Jong-Il it is likely that no single individual will be in a position to take complete control of the country. Rather, with power divided, it is likely a post-Kim collective leadership would emerge with representation from a range of elements of the DPRK Government.

Some analysts argue that we will witness a military predominance in any such grouping, and that North Korea's long-term future will be more like Burma's than South Korea's or China's.[11] That is a possibility. Kim Jong-Il seems to have relied upon the military as his core base of support rather more than did his father. But, as we noted earlier, we don't have a good picture of how North Korean institutions would weigh up against each other in the absence of the Kims. Nor do we even have a good picture of the key individuals that might comprise such a collective leadership. Indeed, the average age of the top 20 leaders attending the 60th national day ceremonies last September was nearly 80,[12] suggesting we might know the king-makers better than the possible kings.

Similar periods of collective leadership have occurred in other communist political systems. Indeed, if we make historic comparisons to other communist, authoritarian societies—the Soviet Union in 1924 following the death of Lenin, or in 1953 following the death of Stalin—we see that these periods of collective rule typically lasted for about four years before a new leader emerged. It is not entirely clear that such a timeframe would apply to North Korea, but in the absence of other data, the four-year period might provide a working guideline.

## Collective caution or collective adventurism?

What would collective leadership mean in terms of North Korean policies? Typically, collective rule tends to promote a leadership style that is unadventurous and opaque. Unadventurous, because members of the group are unwilling to risk their position or power by making decisions that are seen by others as controversial or disadvantageous to the state. And opaque because the process of decision-making tends to be more obscure than when there is a clear leader. North Korean leadership is already comparatively opaque, but tends to have a necessary element of adventurism—'foot-stomping'—about it in order to give the regime something to sell. A period of collective rule in North Korea might well result in 'contests in adventurism' within the leadership, further blurring the boundaries of logic and rationality in North Korean decision-making. And it would be harder for the international community to judge which factions were exercising dominant influence and on which issues.

North Korea's transition into collective leadership would likely increase international fears of regional instability. Those stability concerns combined with a more vacillating and opaque group leadership style suggests that the international community would encounter new and more difficult situations and conditions regarding strategic and foreign policy issues. It would probably be harder for the leadership in Pyongyang to reach consensus on key decision-points in general, and even more so considering issues seen by the DPRK as a matter of national survival—such as the nuclear program and the Six-Party Talks.

Given the range and number of important decisions that remain on issues of North Korea's denuclearisation progress, collective rule in North Korea could well see the negotiations stagnate. At a time when six-party negotiations with North Korea are still incomplete, a leadership collective would bring greater uncertainty and indecision to a process already plagued by such factors.

## The impact on nuclear weapons, strategy and the Six-Party Talks

Pyongyang's interest in nuclear weapons dates back to the Korean War, when it feared US forces might use them, and that interest was subsequently reinforced by US nuclear weapon deployments in South Korea and the South's own interest in a nuclear weapon program. Michael Mazarr, author of *North Korea and the Bomb*, suggests the North first became interested in acquiring nuclear weapons back in the mid-1950s.[13] That interest started to take a more definite physical shape in 1965, when the Russians provided a small research reactor facility at Yongbyon. The site gradually became the heart of the North's program in the 1970s, and an indigenously-constructed nuclear reactor, constructed in the early 1980s, began operating there in 1986. Later that year, US satellites detected evidence of high-explosives testing and construction of a reprocessing plant to separate plutonium from irradiated fuel.[14] Work was, by then, also underway on building much larger reactors at the site.

Pyongyang's commitment to a nuclear weapons program, therefore, would seem to have a considerable lineage. That commitment intensified as the conventional force balance on the Korean peninsula turned increasingly in the South's favour and as North Korea began to lose support from Russia and China in the 1990s. The North's plutonium-based program was 'frozen' in 1994 in exchange for an international assistance package. But Pyongyang's strategic fears were reawakened in the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks by a Bush doctrine of forcible regime change amongst nations that Washington had listed as the 'axis of evil'.

*With one hand it builds nuclear weapons, and with the other it retails—at the negotiating table—the concept of a constrained nuclear program and ultimate denuclearisation.*

Over the years, the North Koreans have pursued a nuclear weapons program both as a means of offsetting Republic of Korea (ROK) and US military dominance, and as a means for attracting international attention. In brief, the North has become adroit, not only at building an arsenal for deterrence purposes, but at leveraging that arsenal to gain both diplomatic recognition and economic assistance from outside states.[15] With one hand it builds nuclear weapons, and with the other it retails—at the negotiating table—the concept of a constrained nuclear program and ultimate denuclearisation.

## Negotiating denuclearisation

Attempts to achieve North Korea's denuclearisation have spanned more than twenty years, beginning with the international pressure on Pyongyang to sign the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985. North Korea did join the NPT, but no safeguards agreement was concluded for several years, during which time the North proceeded to run its reactor and reprocess fuel, outside international supervision.

Under the 1994 Framework Agreement, North Korea agreed to freeze its nuclear program in exchange for various forms of assistance. While the agreement was not a recipe for denuclearisation, some of its principal authors subsequently noted that the security benefits of the freeze 'were substantial and grew with each passing year that Pyongyang refrained from producing and separating more plutonium.'[16] Those benefits included:

- a halt on North Korean plutonium production, which might otherwise have increased much more substantially
- a more stable region, where South Korea and Japan felt less threatened by the North's nuclear program and so less compelled to respond with programs of their own
- a constrained North Korean nuclear program, yielding Pyongyang a smaller set of nuclear-related goods from which it might export nuclear weapons, materials and technologies to other proliferators
- and an opportunity for North Korea to grow a new and more appropriate set of diplomatic connections to its neighbours, even though it showed little willingness to avail itself of that opportunity.[17]

The Framework Agreement collapsed in 2002, after arguments about whether the North was pursuing a clandestine uranium enrichment program, and North Korea withdrew from the NPT in early 2003, resuming operation of its reactor and reprocessing plant at Yongbyon. In doing so, it increased the amount of plutonium it had available for nuclear weapons from perhaps 8–9 kg to something like 40–50 kg (a nuclear weapon needs about 6 kg of plutonium).

So how should we judge the current agreements wrought since 2005 in the Six-Party Talks—the September 2005 joint statement of principles, the February 2007 agreement on initial actions to implement the joint statement, and the October 2007 agreement on second-phase actions? The latest round of the talks (held in Beijing on 8–12 December 2008) focused on a verification protocol, and little headway was made. True, by that time, the North had little incentive to strike a deal with the outgoing Bush administration. But the delay seems more than tactical. An assessment by the International Institute of Strategic Studies suggests that of the eleven technical steps central to implementing the full agreement, the remaining three—removal of all 8,000 plutonium-bearing spent fuel rods from the reactor, cutting the control-rod device mechanism (so that no more fuel can be loaded) and disablement of fresh fuel rods—are those most important to halting Pyongyang's ability to reprocess plutonium. Those three steps would be the most difficult to reverse, and so are the most valuable to North Korea as a source of international aid, leverage and status.[18]

## The future of the Six-Party Talks

There sit in the current climate three distinct, but not unrelated, outlooks regarding the Six-Party Talks.

At one end of the spectrum sit some who argue that the Six-Party Talks have never really had a goal of North Korean denuclearisation,

## Six-Party Talks

Bringing together the US, China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and North Korea, the Six-Party Talks emerged in 2003 as a regional approach to addressing the second North Korea nuclear crisis caused by the collapse of the 1994 Agreed Framework.

The September 2005 meetings established a framework on the principles of action-for-action and a common understanding between the members. While no individual steps were named at this stage, members agreed to an ultimate goal of 'the verifiable denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner' in which the DPRK committed to 'abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards.' It is difficult to square that commitment with North Korea's testing of its first nuclear device on 9 October 2006.

In February 2007 members agreed to DPRK denuclearisation in three phases. Phase One gave DPRK sixty days to shut-down key nuclear facilities at Yongbyon. In practice, it was only in July 2007 that the IAEA verified the shutdown status of the 5MW(e) reactor, fuel rod fabrication facility, reprocessing facility, an uncompleted 50MW(e) reactor, and an uncompleted 200MW(e) reactor. In return North Korea received an initial provision of 50,000 tonnes of heavy fuel oil (HFO) from South Korea, as outlined in the February agreement.

Building on the initial-phase agreements, the six parties met in October 2007 to establish a roadmap for the second phase of actions. In Phase Two DPRK agreed to provide a complete and correct declaration of all nuclear programs by the end of the year. In exchange for a verifiable declaration of facilities and activities, DPRK would receive further economic, energy and humanitarian assistance—the equivalent of 950,000 tons of HFO—and removal by the US from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and moves towards terminating the Trading with the Enemy Act (TWEA).

Pyongyang turned over its nuclear declaration document to China on 26 June 2008, a six-month delay. While the televised demolition the following day (27 June 2008) of the water cooling tower attached to the 5MW(e) reactor seemed to confirm DPRK compliance with nuclear disablement, the verification document fell short of US expectations on three aspects. Firstly, there was no declared tally of current or past nuclear arsenal. Nor was there any mention of the suspected uranium enrichment facilities (that led to the disintegration of the 1994 Agreed Framework), or any mention of the claims that North Korea had been responsible for horizontal proliferation to Syria.

Phase Three, delayed from its initial start date of early 2008, was agreed as the final stages in DPRK denuclearisation that would see all of North Korea's nuclear facilities dismantled, the capture of all fissile material that has been produced, and the complete abandonment of all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs.

as this is something that never could be achieved. Rather, they state that the Six-Party Talks are primarily a mechanism to socialise North Korea as a responsible nuclear state, and to nurture its neighbours' acceptance of this fact. If this truly is the primary purpose of the talks, then conclusion of a specific, detailed, effective, verifiable denuclearisation agreement with the North is a mere side-benefit.

*There sit in the current climate three distinct, but not unrelated, outlooks regarding the Six-Party Talks.*

While it is indisputable that the Six-Party Talks will lead to the socialisation of some members—in particular China, who as chair of the talks has demonstrated a new level of multilateral engagement, a willingness to act as a responsible stakeholder and a regional leader on big issues—it is unlikely that the US, or other members, would set this as the ultimate goal above and beyond actual denuclearisation. Indeed, the quickening of purpose amongst those around the table after the North Korean nuclear test in October 2006 would seem to suggest that socialisation of North Korea is merely a by-product of the Six-Party Talks, rather than the major objective.

At the other end of the spectrum sit analysts, such as John Bolton, who argue that the ultimate goal of the Six-Party Talks must be the complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation (CVID) of North Korea, and anything short of this is a failure. The success of this outlook hinges on verification of past activities as a basis for ensuring future containment and understanding. However, because the talks are foundationally flawed, this can never be achieved. As Bolton argues, 'The basic flaw of the Six-Party Talks is the foundational assumption that North Korea could be talked out of its nuclear weapons. There has never been a shred of evidence, over nearly two decades of nuclear negotiations, that the North is truly prepared to make such a dramatic shift in its strategic thinking.'[19]

In this photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency, the cooling tower of the Yongbyon nuclear complex is demolished in Yongbyon, North Korea, 27 June 2008. AP Photo/Xinhua/Gao Haorong via AAP, © 2008 Associated Press

In the middle of the spectrum are those who focus on 'constrainment' of North Korea's future nuclear program, rather than a full verification of all past activities. This group tends to emphasise—and exploit—the slow tempo of the North's nuclear program. If we date Pyongyang's weapons program from the first arrival of the Russian research reactor, then the program has been running for over forty years, and the North has only a possible handful of nuclear weapons to show for it. The objective of the Six-Party Talks, this group argues, should be to play upon those factors that underpin that slow proliferation tempo, slowing it even further. This approach is the typical non-proliferation one of buying time—time in which a different set of calculations might come into play.

The North Koreans, of course, are part of those who sit in the middle of the spectrum. They want to have their cake and eat it too, which means—as we noted earlier—that they want to have a nuclear arsenal but also to be able to leverage the development of the arsenal in exchange for assistance. It is uncertain how large an arsenal Pyongyang believes it needs. But it might well feel that even the current state of play in the Six-Party Talks still leaves it a 'nuclear option'. US experts calculate that if the North Koreans decide to break out of the agreement and restart operations, they 'could continue to produce approximately six kilograms of plutonium (or roughly one bomb's worth) per year ... over the next five to ten years.'[20]

*An important objective must be to keep the North Korean nuclear arsenal as small as possible.*

An important objective must be to keep the North Korean nuclear arsenal as small as possible. A 'socialised' North Korea which still had a substantial nuclear weapons program would not be a comfortable neighbour in Northeast Asia. A fully denuclearised North Korea might well be impossible to achieve in the near term. But if one believes

(L–R) Japanese envoy to Six-Party Talks Akitaka Saiki, Russian envoy Alexei Borodavkin, North Korean Kim Kye Gwan, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, US envoy Christopher Hill, South Korean Kim Sook and Chinese negotiator Wu Dawei pose for an official photo before heading in to a meeting in Beijing on 11 December 2008. AFP/Elizabeth Dalziel via AAP © 2008 AFP

the goal of the talks to be the eventual denuclearisation of North Korea, as publicly stated, then ongoing decisions are required in order to populate the current sparse framework of accords with concrete and achievable milestones.

That means we need some means for assuring ourselves that key parts of the North Korean declaration are full and complete. We might not need to know every detail of the North's program, but we do need to know, with absolute clarity, how much plutonium was reprocessed. We also need to know whether a uranium-enrichment program exists—or existed—and whether any highly-enriched uranium was produced by that process. We need to know those two facts because they determine how much fissile material Pyongyang actually has.

## A shifting North Korean leadership and the negotiations

With significant denuclearisation issues still on the six-party negotiation table, political indecision due to collective rule in North Korea could have resounding and significant implications for the effectiveness, or survival, of the Six-Party Talks; and thus for regional stability. That would be evident on two fronts—members' confidence in the six-party process and regional relations.

The effectiveness of the Six-Party Talks is measured differently by each of the members according to security, national interests, strategic objectives and domestic policies. While the US measure of effectiveness is linked primarily to matters of international security, the survival of the NPT and stability in Northeast Asia, domestic issues feature more highly on Tokyo's and Seoul's objectives. Japanese judgments about effectiveness are contingent on a resolution of the abduction issues of the 1960s and 1970s. And for South Korea, judgments about effectiveness are dependent on regional stability, territorial integrity and ensuring that the DPRK regime does not collapse abruptly. China became particularly energised on the nuclear issue after the North Korean test, when it saw that if negotiations could not 'manage' the North Korean problem, more drastic options would come into play. So it wants an outcome that suggests 'management' is still a fruitful enterprise, and thereby, one that suggests Chinese interests will be taken into account in future scenarios on the peninsula.

*The growing ineffectiveness of the Six-Party Talks would mean that it will become steadily harder to build a degree of political reconciliation between North Korea and its neighbours.*

The interest in slightly different outcomes makes the Six-Party Talks more fragile than we traditionally think, and that fragility may well be magnified by the sort of shifting, vacillating North Korean policy that might emanate from leadership difficulties in Pyongyang. The growing ineffectiveness of the Six-Party Talks would mean that it will become steadily harder to build a degree of political reconciliation between North Korea and its neighbours. And should collective rule lead to a situation where the Six-Party Talks become characterised by deep suspicion and uncertainty, and regional relations deteriorate, the North Korea that the international community faces in five years might well be more problematic for Northeast Asian stability than the one we see today.

A breakdown in negotiations may lead Tokyo and Seoul to question the efficacy, suitability and desirability of the talks and investigate the possibility of alternative avenues towards ensuring their strategic national objectives—their own nuclear programs—

further destabilising both the region and broader non-proliferation goals. Regionally, a breakdown in the six-party negotiations may see relations deteriorate. While it is true that, as Christopher Hill states; 'this whole six-party process has done more to bring the US and China together than any other process,'[21] it has also put new pressures on the traditional alliances in the region—the US–Japan alliance and the US–South Korea alliance. The failure of negotiations, and an unconstrained nuclear-armed North Korea, could leave a sour taste in the mouths of all the participants, and a set of more radical options competing for primacy in Northeast Asian security.

## Future imperfect

Australia has long believed that it has direct interests at stake in a stable Northeast Asia. But it has only limited abilities to shape events on the Korean peninsula. It has no seat at the table in the Six-Party Talks. Nor can it offer Pyongyang the things the North Koreans most want.

If Kim Jong-Il's health is seriously failing, the consequences both for North Korea and its neighbours might be large. The edifice that has been constructed for managing the North Korean problem in general and the nuclear issue in particular, might begin to crumble. And a North Korea that feels it is 'out of the box' on nuclear weapons, because it already has half a dozen of them in the basement, can easily undo the strategic benefits that a more constrained nuclear program has meant for the region for the last fifteen years. A North Korean nuclear program that continues to weaponise fissile material at a steady pace will worry its neighbours, be more of a problem in terms of proliferating to others, and be less engaged on the Northeast Asian diplomatic circuit. Its neighbours, in turn, would be much less engaged with Pyongyang—and there is some concern that they would be less engaged with each other.

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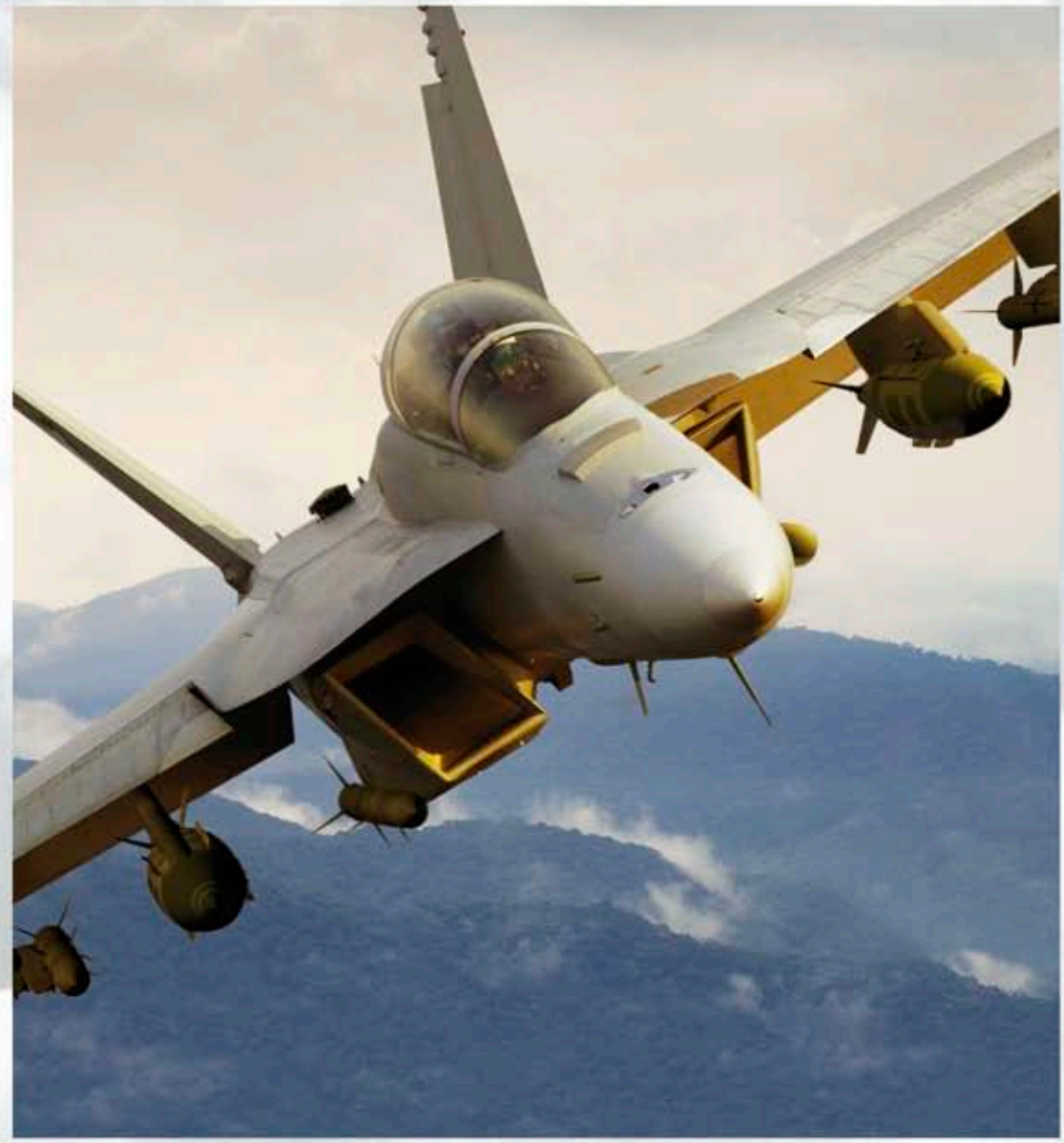

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