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## North Korea and Iran: Will Any Lessons Be Learned?

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- A nuclear Iran is even more of a threat than North Korea. In East Asia, North Korea lacks allies and can be contained by an alliance of surrounding states. However, in the Middle East, Iran's close links to Syria and its support for Hizballah make containment more difficult. In addition, in contrast to North Korea, Iran has large oil revenues to finance a major weapons program.
- North Korea and Iran have extensive military links and, after both Russia and China reduced the flow of technology, Pyongyang became the main source of Teheran's ballistic missile technology and components.
- Iran has followed the North Korean diplomatic strategy of negotiating and appearing to offer some flexibility in order to buy time for completing the production of nuclear weapons. There is still time for concerted international action. Stiff sanctions and total isolation may force Iran to freeze its nuclear program, but if this fails, military action will become necessary.
- A credible threat of an international coalition prepared to use force will make the Iranian leadership pause and reconsider the risks. It may also lead to internal pressures inside Iran, where the general public might understand the risks of becoming targets of military attacks by an international force.
- The United States will still have to lead - there is no alternative on the horizon. In whatever framework works best, the world powers must act swiftly to halt the Iranian program before it can reach the final stage. Instead of the "grand bargain" in negotiation with a revolutionary Iranian regime, a grand coalition is necessary to stop the Iranian nuclear program, and to prevent the total collapse of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

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North Korea's apparent test of a nuclear explosive culminates over ten years of diplomatic failure, for which all of the world powers share blame. Now that the deed is done, there is increasing talk in the United Nations and major capitals about containment and tightening sanctions on Pyongyang, in the hope that this draconian regime will collapse. China, which has in the past been North Korea's major patron and protector, has begun to change its

position. The Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations called for "punitive actions," marking a major shift in policy. At the same time, there is concern that North Korea's action will touch off a regional nuclear arms race, spurring other countries, including South Korea and Japan, to quickly produce their own nuclear weapons.

In parallel, the acute challenges posed by Iran's effort to follow North Korea's path to nuclear weapons have been highlighted. Both countries have violated their commitments as signatories to the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and used ostensibly civilian facilities and materials obtained for research and power generation to produce deadly weapons of mass destruction.<sup>1</sup> And both are major sources of instability and violence in their regions, exporting terror and violence.

### **The Difficulties of Containing a Nuclear Iran**

Like the North Korean regime, the Iranian leadership - now headed by the extremist President Ahmadinejad - has revolutionary goals that seek to promote a different world order, and to destroy the centrality of democratic values. Both regimes support, fund, and train terrorist groups - Iran's close alliance with Hizballah in Lebanon led to the recent destructive war after a cross-border attack by Hizballah left eight Israeli soldiers dead and two kidnapped. Ahmadinejad's explicit genocidal threats to "wipe Israel off the map" go even farther than those of his predecessors.

For this and other reasons, a nuclear Iran is even more of a threat than North Korea. In the East Asian region, North Korea lacks allies and can be contained by an alliance of surrounding states. However, in the Middle East, Iran's close links to Syria and its support for Hizballah make containment more difficult. In contrast to North Korea, whose limited resources make rapid expansion of a nuclear force difficult (despite the willingness to starve the population), Iran has large oil revenues to finance a major weapons program, which will be very difficult to contain.

In addition, fear of the consequences of an Iranian nuclear weapons capability and a general arms race would quickly lead to similar efforts by other regional powers, including Egypt (whose leaders have recently stated their intention of re-starting a "peaceful" nuclear effort), Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other countries. This would mark the complete collapse of what remains of the NPT regime, and be far more dangerous and destabilizing than the situation created in East Asia by the North Korean nuclear test.

### **The Teheran-Pyongyang Connection**

North Korea and Iran have extensive military links and, after both Russia and China reduced the flow of technology, Pyongyang became the main source of Teheran's ballistic missile technology and components. In addition, published reports attributed to intelligence sources have found evidence of nuclear cooperation between these two rogue states. Although North Korea's nuclear weapons program is believed to be based on separated plutonium recovered from a reactor, and Iran's efforts are based on enriched uranium produced by centrifuge technology purchased from Pakistan's A.Q. Khan, both North Korea and Iran are pursuing multiple approaches and paths, providing the rationale for sharing technology.

Iran has followed the North Korean diplomatic strategy of negotiating and appearing to offer some flexibility in order to buy time for completing the production of nuclear weapons. The apparent successful conclusion of the North Korean project, and the reported explosion of a test device, provides an additional impetus for Iran to continue in this direction. In addition, Iran has adopted the North Korean practice of building massive underground facilities located in mountainous terrain and protected by meters of concrete. North Korean advisors were

reportedly spotted in Lebanon, and the vast tunnels built by Hizballah may be evidence of these links.

### **Policy Options on Iran**

One of the central factors in fifteen years of failed efforts to prevent North Korea from completing and testing a nuclear weapon was the absence of a credible threat to use force. In the early 1990s, when the first signs of activities related to building nuclear weapons were detected, the dominant view was that the regime in Pyongyang was only using the nuclear threat as a bargaining ploy. Reflecting the popular intellectual trends in Europe and North America during this period, policy-makers used the principles of social psychology to argue that primary emphasis should be placed on "understanding the needs" of the North Koreans. They opposed threats to use force, and called for negotiations accompanied by guarantees that North Korea would not be subject to attempts at regime change.

In Washington, the Clinton Administration coincided with the belief in "the end of history," following the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. And for many European leaders and analysts, the threat of military action was unthinkable. The result was an "historic compromise," in the form of a framework agreement, based on cooperation and continuing negotiations, which gave the North Korean leadership time to finish making nuclear weapons.

The successor Bush Administration recognized that this approach had failed, and that revolutionary regimes (the "Axis of Evil") sought far more than dialogue and recognition. But after 9/11, the Americans focused most of their energy and power - military as well as diplomatic - on Afghanistan and Iraq, hoping to make them examples of the return to *realpolitik*. Tactical mistakes and faith in a quick transition to stable democracy, particularly in Iraq, foiled this effort, providing many Europeans, for whom America-bashing is a religion, with a reason to celebrate. In the process, the U.S. lost leverage against North Korea and Iran.

At the same time, no other power stepped forward to lead the effort against the North Korean and Iranian nuclear weapons programs. Europe (with the exception of Tony Blair) continued to promote dialogue and negotiation, as did the Japanese government. China and Russia, whose power and influence has grown considerably in the world, maintained foreign policies based primarily on maneuvering for advantage in opposition to America. As a result, while the U.S. could not act independently to stop North Korea, no other power stepped forward to show any leadership.

In the case of Iran, there is still time for concerted international action. Stiff sanctions and total isolation may force Iran to freeze its nuclear program, but if this fails, military action will become necessary. A credible threat of an international coalition prepared to use force will make the Iranian leadership pause and reconsider the risks. It may also lead to internal pressures in Iran, where the general public might understand the risks of becoming targets of military attacks by an international force. While President Ahmadinejad and other members of the regime support suicide bombers and terror attacks affiliated with Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, the Iranian leaders are not suicidal themselves and have been cautious in avoiding direct confrontation with Israel or the U.S.

For these changes to take place before Iran completes its own nuclear weapons (estimates on this time frame differ), the United States will still have to lead - there is no alternative on the horizon. Washington will not be able to dictate policy, but it must head the coalition. The secondary powers - Europe, China, Russia, and Japan - have no alternative to working under American leadership, and to share the risks and costs. The framework for cooperation may require the abandonment of the pretense that the United Nations, including the Security Council, is adequate for responding to acute international crises, and an ad-hoc or alternative great power framework may be necessary for this. The G-8 already has a working group

dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat, and can expanded to include a responsible Chinese leadership.

In whatever framework works best, the world powers must act swiftly to halt the Iranian program before it can reach the final stage, again following the North Korean model. Instead of the "grand bargain" in negotiation with a revolutionary Iranian regime, a grand coalition is necessary to stop the Iranian nuclear program. The alternative is global instability and the potential for unimaginable destruction.

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#### **Note**

1. India and Pakistan, which tested nuclear weapons in 1998, were not signatories of the NPT and, as such, did not violate this international agreement, in contrast to the case of North Korea and Iran. Israel is not an NPT signatory and has not violated any commitments, tested weapons, or declared itself a nuclear power.

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