A New Twenty Years' Crisis?
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E. H. Carr's powerful little book *The Twenty Years' Crisis* presciently argued that the events ineluctably leading Europe to war in 1939 were not sudden and new, but rather two decades in the making. Though written in another time and of another place, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* could be offered as briefing material today for those policymakers and students of international affairs struggling to make sense of the rapid escalation of the crisis revolving around the nuclear weapons program of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

The latest round of six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear weapons program has just been convened in Beijing. With one of the most difficult aspects of getting the North Korean side to negotiate being actually getting them to arrive at a meeting, there is little optimism that this latest round of talks will be successful. And although Pyongyang has signaled a desire to make a deal, offering to freeze its nuclear activity in return for energy assistance, it continues to reject the Bush administration's demands for the unilateral dismantling of its program.

The North Korean nuclear crisis, of course, is not exactly breaking news. If, like Professor Carr, we wish to date the duration of the crisis according to its true defining events, we would be obliged to look back many years: in this case, to Pyongyang's November 1992 refusal to cooperate further with the inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), or to the DPRK's initial March 1993 announcement of its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) that gave IAEA inspectors authority to pursue their inquiry.

The particulars of the current nuclear crisis differ in some respects from those a decade earlier, but it is essentially the very same crisis, shaped by the very same fundamentals. Just like Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis*, this Korean crisis may continue to fester for years to come, but eventually, just as in interwar Europe, the perpetuation of an inherently unstable balance will no longer be feasible. For most of the actors embroiled in the drama, the preferred outcome to the crisis would clearly be a comprehensive resolution through peaceful, diplomatic negotiations. But, as in that earlier drama in Europe, the most desirable outcome may also be the least likely.

Three alternative outcomes from the current impasse suggest themselves. The first would be a peaceful, negotiated settlement—a diplomatic agreement whereby the North gave up its nuclear weapons program. The second would be to ignore the DPRK's extortion diplomacy and simply accept the advent of a nuclear-armed North Korea, coping with all the attendant dangers as they arise. A third outcome would be to see through a strategy of regime change in the DPRK.

The peaceful, negotiated settlement is clearly the preferable outcome for most of the governments caught up in the North Korean nuclear crisis. Certainly it would be the least troubling and most immediately advantageous scenario for all of Pyongyang's potential negotiating partners. Unfortunately, the prospect of a negotiated agreement to dismantle Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program permanently and completely is extraordinarily remote. One may appreciate the odds against such an outcome when one considers the many obstacles against it.

One must begin with the problem of North Korean intentions. Over the past dozen years Western diplomacy has devoted no small effort to probing these. The Republic of Korea's (ROK) Tae Woo probed for two years, eventually securing a Joint North-South Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in 1992. When that agreement collapsed, the Clinton administration engaged Pyongyang with a year and a half of diplomacy that culminated in the 1994 Agreed Framework. After 1998, in the wake of the first episode that threatened to topple the Agreed Framework, the Clinton administration developed what became known as the "Perry Process." And of course President Kim Dae Jung probed North Korean nuclear intentions from 1998 to early 2003 with his now-discredited "sunshine policy." Reviewing this record, one might suggest we actually have a fairly clear idea of North Korea's nuclear intentions. From what we can see, those intentions
are not conducive to a voluntary denuclearization of the DPRK.

Another problem concerns the international precedent that would be established by a negotiated solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis. Thus far, North Korea has violated non-proliferation strictures more explicitly and provocatively than any other contemporary state—yet it has suffered no penalties for its behavior (apart from the cutoff of free KEDO oil supplies). The international community has already purchased an end to the North Korean nuclear program, through the now-moribund Agreed Framework. If it were to once again provide resources to shut down the North Korean nuclear project in a new settlement, the signal to would-be proliferators could only be destabilizing.

Apart from all the other obstacles to a diplomatic settlement of the current nuclear crisis, there is also the problem of the practical details that would attend any such negotiation with North Korea. With the exception of the July 1953 armistice ending the Korean conflict—which has been upheld only through continuing U.S. force of arms—it is hard to point to an agreement Pyongyang has abided over its 55 years of state power. North Korea has regularly and repeatedly flaunted the protocols surrounding the use of diplomatic pouches, using these to transport narcotics and other illegal material to countries in which North Korean officials enjoy diplomatic immunity. The North Korean government has sponsored state terrorism in countries with which it enjoys diplomatic relations. It has violated the territorial waters of governments who have granted it diplomatic recognition through state-sponsored shipments of drugs and military contraband. Not least of all, the DPRK has violated the rules of the IAEA (removing cameras, seals, and technicians from nuclear facilities), and has openly stated that it will no longer abide by the 1994 Agreed Framework, the NPT, or the Joint North-South Declaration.

The second possible outcome of the current crisis ultimately involves living with a nuclear North Korea. The United States has lived with, and outlasted, dangerous nuclear states in the past, but the costs and risks posed by a nuclear North Korea would be fearsome. The example of a North Korean nuclear breakout would inescapably encourage proliferation in other regions—and a nuclear North Korea could abet that proliferation through export of armaments, technology, or expertise. More than any other modern state, Pyongyang makes its living from international military extortion; nuclear weaponry would dramatically improve the returns of that policy. With a hostile nuclear North Korea at its geographic center, the economies of the Northeast Asian region could not help but suffer: the confidence dip and attendant business downturn that the ROK suffered in early 2003 would presumably represent only a foretaste of what might lie in store for South Korea, Japan, and even China. And a nuclear-armed North Korea would necessarily and inescapably undermine the credibility of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the U.S.-Japan alliance: the very security architecture upon which postwar Northeast Asia’s economic and political successes have been built.

The third possible outcome would be for the international community (or the United States) to aim for, and to achieve, regime change in the North. It is more difficult to generalize about this outcome, for it can be envisioned with a great many possible variations, some of them quite divergent. One can be assured that the path to regime change would be fraught with danger, and that the result, under even the most optimistic variants, would involve tremendous disruption and uncertainty—at least in the short run. There is a real possibility that the push for regime change in North Korea could result in war, in which case the likelihood of Seoul’s escaping unscathed—no matter how overwhelming the ultimate victory for the U.S.-ROK alliance—would seem quite small. Whatever their other differences, the governments of neighboring China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan are today united in their aversion to a policy of regime change. Within the senior reaches of the Bush administration, the notion of regime change in North Korea has been discussed—but apparently only toyed with. Occasional flirtations notwithstanding, U.S. policy has never actually embraced the argument that regime change is either desired or necessary in North Korea. A less drastic form of “regime change” might see Pyongyang give up its nuclear program, become a “normal” nation, and undergo serious economic and social reform under pressure from the international community, led by the five nations surrounding North Korea. But there has been almost no indication that the North Korean leadership would even remotely consider such an outcome.

In summation, there is no coalescence around a strategy for North Korea, either in the United States or among its partners in Northeast Asia. The situation is tilting by the day in an incalculable direction. Like the interwar years in Europe (1919-39) there is an unstable equilibrium and we are faced with an inherently dangerous situation. The fear is that we may already be teetering on the edge of a dark precipice whose abyss is too horrible to contemplate.
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