La Grande Illusion, Korean Style
Nicholas Eberstadt, American Enterprise Institute, February 12, 2004.

How many times can someone sell the same dead puppy to the same bunch of suckers? In effect, North Korea's Kim Jong Il is currently conducting an international experiment to determine the precise answer to this question.

The goods "the Dear Leader" has been hawking, of course aren't really non-performing pets-they're phony nuclear deals. And the designated "marks" in this scam aren't schoolchildren, or simpletons at a county fair-they're top Western and Asian statesmen.

Today, once again, Pyongyang is asking the United States and its Northeast Asian allies and associates to pony up to buy a this-time-we-really-mean-it shutdown of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program.

Given the high stakes in this North Korean sting, and the sophistication of the intended victims, you'd think the game would have been shut down early. But you'd be wrong. The latest hapless steps toward another session of "Six Party talks" on the North Korean nuclear drama, in fact, suggest that the usual dupes are assuming position for another round of North Korean atomic bait-and-switch.

A little background may elucidate the present state of play. The dynastic enterprise known as the DPRK has been open for business since 1948, and for most of that time it has been building, and gaming, its nuclear program. Long ago, Kim & Son figured out a shakedown formula for extracting protection money from abroad in return for promising to scrap the nuke program.

It works like this: Make a Deal. Break the deal. Then demand a new deal for more, issuing dark threats until you get what you want.

That gambit, to be sure, could be dismissed as little more than basic coursework for Mafia 101. But any Goodfella would have to admit: so far, the formula's worked pretty well for Pyongyang.

Just look at the record. In the early 1990s, Pyongyang got the previous President Bush to remove all US nuclear weapons from South Korea to grease a 1991 North-South deal for the "de-nuclearization" of the Korean peninsula. Soon Pyongyang was caught cheating on that particular understanding-so it threatened to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire", and got an improved bargain from the Clinton Administration (the "Agreed Framework" of 1994, with free oil shipped and free nuclear reactors in exchange for a freeze on then-extant DPRK nuclear sites). And when Kim & Co. seemed to be cheating on the "Agreed Framework" in 1999, Washington paid 500,000 tons in food aid-Pyongyang actually called it an "inspection fee"-to check out a single suspect nuclear site. (In the course of those negotiations, incidentally, North Korea warned Washington about a possible "pre-emptive strike" on the US if the talks didn't work out.)

In October 2002, once again, North Korea was caught cheating on its nuclear freeze arrangements-this time, with its now-notorious secret highly enriched uranium (HEU) program. So what did Pyongyang do? Naturally, it upped the ante.

It kicked out all the "Framework's" inspectors, unsealed the 8000 "Framework" plutonium fuel rods, tore up its copy of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and announced that it was reprocessing the fissile material for a "peace deterrent". It started saying it possessed nuclear weapons, and that was time to test, or sell, one of them. And it began asking its "negotiating partners" for a whole lot more money to keep things quiet in the neighborhood. To prove it was serious about its new proposed terms of trade, North Korea blew off Beijing and Washington in
the “Three Party Talks” of April 2003, and then dissed them both again-plus Seoul, Tokyo and Moscow-in the expanded “Six Party Talks” of August 2003.

So here we are. And as 2004 commences, it looks as if Pyongyang's blackmail entrepreneurs have judged their international market correctly. Far from fashioning real-time penalties for the world's most naked and provocative violator of proliferation strictures, Western and Asian diplomats are whipping out their calculators to figure the new price for postponing a North Korean nuclear breakout.

For the moment, the primary obstacle to nuclear appeasement bonuses for Pyongyang is the United States—or more specifically, the President and certain limited circles within his government. Just this week, however, Pyongyang executed a deft end-run around W., using US minions to do the blocking.

North Korea's play was to invite an unofficial delegation of Americans (all would-be dealmakers) for a pilgrimage to Pyongyang—and then, with the international media trained on the event, to rush past the White House with a highly-publicized “bold solution” for ending the nuclear impasse.

As the US stage props settled into their hotel rooms, North Korea's news agency pitched the package: in return for an end to Washington's sanctions and a resumption of free supplies for oil, power and energy from the US and its allies, Pyongyang would "refrain from [the] test and production of nuclear weapons and stop even operating nuclear power industry for a peaceful purpose [s]."

Some deal, huh? North Korea gets the status quo ante "Framework" fuel aid, plus new money from the World Bank and other institutions (“ending sanctions” is code language for Washington’s unlocking the door to multilateral aid). And for all this, America gets a promise—from Kim Jong Il, no less—that he won't blow off a bomb, or build any new ones—at least for now.

So how did North Korea's interlocutors react to this awful proposal? By falling all over themselves. "A important and serious step", enthused Moscow. "Helpful in creating the atmosphere for a second round of talks", chirped Seoul. Beijing "welcomed" North Korea's "further willingness" to "stop nuclear activities". And in Washington, an upbeat Colin Powell hailed the offer as "an interesting step", "a positive step" for "the next round of six party framework talks". Lost in this feel-good chorus was any apparent recollection of the original objective of those framework talks: namely, to hold Pyongyang to its previous promises to scrap its nuke program completely and forever.

As North Korea's neighbors get ready to shuffle off to their next obligatory fleecing in this ongoing hustle, one may wonder: what keeps this con going? It's not that American and Asian leadership is invincibly ignorant—not at all. Rather, it's that they've bought into a variant of La Grande Illusion (as such thinking was called in France in the late 1930s). The notion that the Kim regime has absolutely no intention of ever giving up its nuclear capability—at any price, for any reason—is too terrible to face. Better to play pretend—even if this means being bilked without cease for fake "breakthroughs" and bogus "accords".

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