

"The North Korean Imbrolio: Who Gains?"

North Korea has joined the nuclear club, and everyone else claims they are upset. Are they really? There are five actors that really count in this affair: North Korea, the United States, South Korea, China, and Japan. They have all in fact reacted quite differently.

North Korea is undoubtedly the most pleased of all. They set off a nuclear explosion for several obvious reasons. They are persuaded that having a weapon in hand eliminates the likelihood of a United States attack. And it probably does. They also wanted to be taken more seriously as a world actor. And despite appearances in the last few weeks, they have probably accomplished this too. They wanted to show not only the United States but everyone else, specifically including China, that there was nothing much they could do about North Korea's decision, and they seem to have done that. And underlying all this, their primary objective no doubt is the survival of the regime. And they have probably done as much as is within their power to ensure this. But of course they too are not all-powerful.

The general world analysis of the effect of their action is that it will ensure a spread of nuclear armament, first of all in the region. I agree. Within a very short time, I expect Japan to start its program. It will be followed by South Korea. And then - no one mentions this - it will be followed by Taiwan, thus realizing a totally nuclearized Northeast Asia. Is this good or bad? The answer depends on whose perspective you take.

The United States is surely the most unhappy. In a period when U.S. effective power is declining everywhere, the last zone where it still seemed to have a strong edge has been Northeast Asia. No more. The Bush regime hasn't known what to do. It pushed for a rapid punishment of North Korea by the U.N. Security Council. What it came up with was a limp rag - a resolution that, albeit unanimous, might have been written by the North Koreans. Had a Democratic administration agreed to such a resolution, the first person to denounce it for its weakness would have been John Bolton. But since Bolton is Bush's Ambassador to the United Nations, he has hailed the resolution as a great accomplishment. Unpersuaded by Bolton's rhetoric, Condoleezza Rice has made the rounds of Northeast Asia, saying that she can not impose on anyone how they will implement the limp rag. Still she "expects" that China and South Korea will live up to the obligations she presumes they have, which they have no intention of doing and have said so.

Japan claims that it is very unhappy, and shares the U.S. hardline position. Pardon me for being skeptical. Isn't Shinzo Abe the man who became prime minister by promising to make Japan into a "normal" nation? This is code language for changing the constitution, creating a full-fledged army and nuclear weapons. The North Korean nuclear explosion gives Abe the immediate justification, and he will take it. Indeed, U.S. neo-cons are publicly calling on him to take it. They do so because they believe it will strengthen the U.S. position in the region and make more likely military action against North Korea.

But a Japanese nuclear program may well have the opposite consequence. The one thing that has tied Japan most closely to the United States in the last fifty years has been Japan's dependence on the U.S. nuclear shield. Once Japan has its own nuclear weapons, it has the possibility of being more independent. And sooner or later, it will realize this possibility.

China is of course unhappy, and for many reasons. For one thing, North Korea's action exposes the limits of China's power, which seems as helpless as the United States in this situation. For another thing, nuclear proliferation is not in China's interests. It's not worried about North Korea. It's worried about Japan and, above all, Taiwan.

Japan and South Korea share the desperate desire to see the North Korean regime survive (no "regime change" in their program). They are both banking on the possibility that their various kinds of economic assistance will bring about a slow and mild liberalization of the regime - more of the Deng Xiaoping than the Gorbachev variety. Whether this is realistic we shall have to see. But do they have any choice except to bank on it, and work for it?

South Korea is in the most difficult position of the five powers. It is the only country in which public opinion seems split down the middle - between the party in power which believes in "engagement" with North Korea and the opposition which wants to replicate the Japanese position of close alignment with the United States. This will undoubtedly be one of the major issues in next year's presidential elections.

by Immanuel Wallerstein