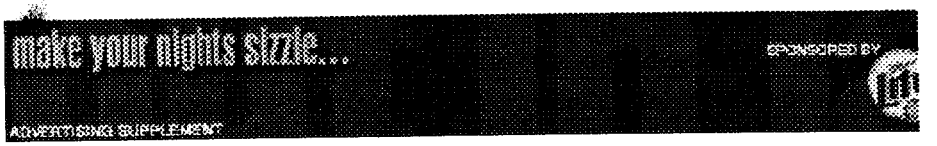


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COMMENTARY

# A Bombshell That's Actually an Olive Branch

## In acknowledging its nuclear program, N. Korea opens door to negotiations.

By Leon V. Sigal
Leon V. Sigal is director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council in New York and the author of "Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy With North Kor

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What is going on in North Korea? First, the regime admitted in September that it had abducted Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. Then, in talks with Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly two weeks ago, it acknowledged what U.S. intelligence had long suspected, that it has a covert program to enrich uranium, the explosive ingredient in nuclear arms.

In the first case, its admission opened the way to normalization talks with Japan. With this new disclosure, Pyongyang wants to cut a deal with Washington.

Hard-liners in the Bush administration may want to use that "confession" to punish the regime in North Korea, but more sober-minded officials know that the crime-and-punishment approach will not work.

North Korea is no Iraq. It wants to end its lifelong enmity with the United States and has demonstrated its readiness to give up its nuclear, missile and other arms programs in return. By acknowledging its covert nuclear program -- after being confronted with U.S. evidence -- Pyongyang is putting it on the negotiating table. Washington should take up Pyongyang's invitation to diplomatic give-and-take.

In the late 1980s, North Korea's longtime ruler, Kim Il Sung, decided he had no better way to provide for its security than to improve relations with the U.S., South Korea and Japan. When Washington, determined to put a stop to Pyongyang's nuclear arming before easing its isolation, impeded closer ties to South Korea and Japan, Pyongyang decided to barter its nuclear arms program for better relations. However, it kept its nuclear option open as leverage on Washington to live up to its end of the bargain. It is still doing so.

That became the basis of the October 1994 Agreed Framework, whereby the North agreed to freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear arms program. That accord did not explicitly cover uranium

When Republicans took control of Congress in elections just weeks later, they denounced the deal as appeasement. Unwilling to challenge Congress, the Clinton administration backpedaled on implementation. When the U.S. was slow to fulfill the terms of the 1994 accord, North Korea threatened to break it.

At the same time, Pyongyang also aimed to try again to end enmity, this time using its missiles as inducement. That effort culminated in 2000 with Kim Jong Il's offer to end exports of all missile technology and to freeze testing, production and deployment of all missiles with a range of 300 miles or more.

Pyongyang's tough bargaining tactics has led hard-liners in the Bush administration to conclude that it is engaging in blackmail to obtain economic aid, without giving up anything in return. It is not. It is cooperating when the U.S. cooperates and retaliating when the U.S. reneges.

Recognizing that, South Korea and Japan have moved to reconcile with North Korea, opening the way to negotiations to improve their security.

Pyongyang now wants to make a deal with Washington. On Aug. 29, Undersecretary of State John Bolton accused North Korea of having "an active program" of chemical weapons, "one of the most robust bio-weapons programs on Earth," being "the world's foremost peddler of ballistic missile-related equipment, components, materials and technical expertise" and not allowing international inspectors "to complete all of their required tasks."

On Aug. 31, a North Korean foreign ministry spokesman responded by citing all the concerns raised by Bolton and adding: "The DPRK [North Korea] clarified more than once that if the U.S. has a will to drop its hostile policy toward the DPRK, it will have dialogue with the U.S. to clear the U.S. of its worries over its security."

By threatening Pyongyang, the hard-liners could provoke a replay of the 1994 nuclear crisis that put Korea on the brink of war. Then, as now, the U.S. had three options: impose sanctions, which were rightly deemed unlikely to be effective in curbing the North's nuclear program; attack the North's nuclear sites; or negotiate.

U.S. saber rattling is sure to alienate South Korea and Japan and antagonize China. And how can nuclear sites be attacked if their whereabouts are unknown? By refusing to negotiate, the administration would leave itself with no other option than to live with a nuclear-armed North Korea.

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