

CORRESPONDENCE

North Korea, Nuclear Safety, and Track-Two Diplomacy

I enjoyed Sigfried Hecker's recent insights regarding his many trips to North Korea (see "Extraordinary Visits: Lessons Learned from Engaging with North Korea," 18.2, July 2011, pp. 445–55). Two comments by Dr. Hecker in particular interested me greatly. The first was that while he was impressed with the technical capabilities of Yongbyon's nuclear workers, he found their health and safety practices to be "unsatisfactory." The second was his closing remark that "we are threatened more by North Korea's isolation than by engagement." As another scholar who has visited North Korea quite recently, I would like to further explore both issues and discuss how North Korea's dubious state of nuclear safety might represent an opportunity for increased engagement through track-two (unofficial and nongovernmental) interaction.

The March 11 Fukushima Daiichi accident was a reminder that nuclear safety is not a national issue; it is a global one. Radioactive particles from the accident were carried beyond Japan's borders to other countries and were detected across the world, even as far away as the United States. About twenty-five years earlier, radiation from the Chernobyl disaster contaminated not only Ukraine, but also the nearby Soviet republics of Russia and Belarus. A serious nuclear accident at a North Korean nuclear power reactor could likewise have potentially devastating effects in South Korea or in northern Chinese cities like Shenyang and Beijing.

A nuclear accident in North Korea would also create an immediate regional political crisis. Given the secretive nature of North Korea's nuclear program and its

withdrawal from membership in the International Atomic Energy Agency, it is difficult to assess the current safety measures and protocols of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). However, I suspect that given the extraordinary challenges that North Korea's nuclear power and weapons programs currently face, safety measures are likely to have been neglected compared to modern facilities and procedures in neighboring countries. And while the DPRK has probably benefited from covert assistance from another state in the construction of its experimental light water reactor, it is unclear whether assistance also was provided in the form of rigorous safety training. It is entirely likely that North Korea's safety protocols and disaster management are woefully unprepared—or at least underprepared—to deal with the ramifications of a nuclear accident.

Thankfully, this risk does not appear to be an urgent one. As Dr. Hecker notes, despite fifty years of nuclear development, Pyongyang still does not produce nuclear electricity in any significant quantities. Its oldest reactor has been gutted, and two others that were under construction have been abandoned. However, indications are that work on the experimental light water reactor is continuing. While this reactor might pose a very long-term threat if North Korea is able to successfully pursue a uranium-based path to enlarging its tiny nuclear arsenal, it also represents a possible avenue for track-two engagement with North Korea on nuclear safety.

Nuclear issues, even benign ones like nuclear safety, are probably too sensitive to

Nonproliferation Review, Vol. 18, No. 3, November 2011

ISSN 1073-6700 print/ISSN 1746-1766 online/11/030475-03

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2011.618596>

engage with North Korea about directly. Direct government-to-government interactions would also risk the moral hazard of legitimizing North Korea's nuclear program. However, track-two interactions, similar to Dr. Hecker's visits, offer an alternative model for engagement with the regime. The issue is one that would probably be attractive to North Korea, since in addition to the benefits of improved safety, it would allow the DPRK to demonstrate that it is a responsible "world citizen" on this issue.

While Pyongyang's international isolation might lead one to believe that the "Hermit Kingdom" is unconcerned with global opinion, the nature of my visit to North Korea in June 2010 suggested the opposite. Western visitors are subject to an extraordinary level of choreography while in the country. When outside of the hotel, visitors must travel with the group and their North Korean guides at all times, and taking pictures from inside a vehicle while in Pyongyang is generally forbidden. These controls are to limit the interaction between foreigners and ordinary North Koreans, but more importantly they are in place to craft a specific message about the regime. Site visits are negotiated, re-negotiated, and then negotiated again between the foreign tour guides and their North Korean counterparts. The North Korean guides' goal is to steer foreigners to sites, such as the Grand People's Study House (Pyongyang's massive central library), that portray a "rich and strong" country. The international tour guides, however, negotiate to visit sites of interest to foreign visitors who are curious about the "real" DPRK: local restaurants, the subway system, street markets. The result is a tour that features a strange mix of glimpses of unguarded daily life and orchestrated moments at monuments to the regime.

My visit took place just a few weeks after a North Korean mini-submarine sank the *Cheonan*, a South Korean corvette. On my return trip into the North Korean city of Kaesong I saw a remarkable sight. I watched in amazement as thousands of people surged through the streets of Kaesong after attending an anti-Lee Myung-bak rally to protest South Korea's accusations of a North Korean attack. International media covered the rally in Pyongyang, but my small group was almost certainly the only group of foreigners to witness this rally, and it left me wondering—how many other rallies were there across the country, and to what degree were they motivated by the DPRK's calculation that they would influence foreign opinion?

Besides the benefits of reducing risk and increasing engagement, working with North Korea on nuclear safety might also serve as a gateway to working with North Korea on other nuclear-related issues, such as nuclear security. Kenneth Luongo, president of the Partnership for Global Security, has suggested a similar initiative that partly inspired this idea, which is to engage with North Korea on nuclear security through assistance with security for radioactive isotopes in hospitals. The ultimate goal in both cases is to pursue a policy that will reduce risks and lead to greater engagement.

In closing, I agree with Dr. Hecker's assessment that the US strategy toward North Korea must be one that is focused on managing risks and instability. Opening a nuclear-related dialogue on a side issue such as safety would be beneficial for both sides, and could lead toward greater successes down the road.

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In Memoriam: Jonathan B. Tucker

It is with great sadness and dismay that we observe the July 31 passing of Jonathan B. Tucker.

Jonathan was a wonderful colleague and friend at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies for nearly fifteen years, first in Monterey, California, and then in Washington, DC. At the time of his unexpected death, Jonathan was a member of the Editorial Board of the *Nonproliferation Review*—a contribution that was just one of the many ways in which Jonathan demonstrated his deep commitment to nonproliferation.

He was unsurpassed as a writer, producing brilliant books at an amazing pace, and with great modesty and seemingly little effort. He never sought the

limelight, but was always an eloquent commentator in English, French, and German on policy issues as diverse as public health, bioterrorism, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and dual-use export controls. Jonathan was the epitome of the gentleman scholar, mentor to young and old alike, and respected by everyone.

We mourn his passing, which is a tremendous loss to the nonproliferation community and his many friends the world over.

William C. Potter

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