

North Korea's Putative Nukes

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Gwynne Dyer: Nobody really knows much about Kim Jong-il except that he doesn't get out enough and that he has the worst haircut of any world leader. His strategies, his motives, and even his rationality are all open to question: he's probably sane, technically speaking, but the circumstances of his upbringing make sanity a pretty flexible concept in his case.

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It's been true for years for North Korea, and for any other country that finds itself in a serious confrontation with the US government: if you can possibly get away with the claim, say that you already have nuclear weapons. The US only invades countries that don't have them yet. Saddam Hussein's problem was that nobody would have believed him even if he had made such a claim. Whereas North Korea's negotiators privately told their US counterparts that their country had nuclear weapons in 2002, as soon as the Bush administration's implacable hostility to Pyongyang became clear. It was at least a plausible lie, if not the truth -- and now the North Korean regime has said it again -- publicly, this time. Late last week the headlines dutifully relayed the news that North Korea had stated that it had "manufactured nuclear weapons for self-defence." Moreover, Kim Jong-il's regime declared that it was "suspending for an indefinite period" its participation in the six-nation talks (with the United States and its regional neighbours, China, Japan, South Korea and Russia) whose declared goal was to head off a nuclear-armed North Korea. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is the most hermetically sealed society in the world, and it is doubtful that any foreign intelligence agencies, including American and Chinese ones, have firm evidence about North Korean nukes one way or the other. What is puzzling is the timing of the latest claim, because recently the Bush administration has been trying a softer line with Pyongyang. Iran got the full treatment in President Bush's State of the Union speech early this month, including exhortations to the Iranian people to overthrow their government, but on North Korea he simply promised to "work closely with governments in Asia to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions." No more "axis of evil" talk, not even a repeat of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's slap at North Korea last month as an "outpost of tyranny." Senior State Department officials were sent to Tokyo and Beijing early this month to discuss a new American initiative: "We are ready to go. We have a serious proposal and we are ready to discuss it without preconditions," said Michael Green, Asia director at the US National Security Council. So why would Pyongyang choose this moment to declare that it really does have nuclear weapons, so there, and it doesn't want to negotiate about them any more? This is where it all goes opaque, because nobody really knows much about Kim Jong-il except that he doesn't get out enough and that he has the worst haircut of any world leader. His strategies, his motives, and even his rationality are all open to question: he's probably sane, technically speaking, but the circumstances of his upbringing -- favoured son of the dictator-for-life in the world's most totalitarian state -- make sanity a pretty flexible concept in his case. The one constant in North Korea's diplomatic style is a propensity for over-bidding and bluster: threats and ultimatums clearly play a larger role in the internal politics of the regime, and simply get replicated in its external behaviour even though they are bound to have negative results when addressed to foreigners. China, for example, is so annoyed by North Korean tactics that its reports of Pyongyang's latest outburst did not include the usual explanation that North Korean nuclear weapons really can only have the defensive purpose of

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detering a US attack. That is logically true. The Pyongyang regime's nukes, if it has any, could only reach its immediate neighbours. Since North Korea has neither the means nor the will to invade any of those neighbours (South Korea has over twice North Korea's population, Japan five times, China sixtytimes), the only logical purpose for seeking the ability to drop a couple of nuclear weapons on them is to deter them from letting the US use their territory as a base to invade North Korea, or to punish the United States (indirectly) for launching direct strikes at North Korea with planes and missiles. Logically, therefore, Pyongyang's nuclear weapons are no threat unless the United States is determined to invade North Korea, which it clearly is not. However, the erratic and unreadable character of Kim's regime makes it hard for Washington to accept North Korea's nukes as easily as it accommodated itself to Israel's, India's and Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear weapons. The Bush administration feels obliged to do SOMETHING about North Korea. Is it likely to do something stupid? Almost certainly not. Washington's current strategy, if the six-nation talks do not resume, seems to be focussed on further trade and financial sanctions to twist the screw tighter on the economically desperate North Korean regime. And if you actually listen closely to the North Koreans, behind their bluster about the bomb they are still looking for a "justification for us to attend the (six-nation) talks" -- a little less verbal abuse, a few more carrots, and they'll come back to the table. It's a bit like trying to manage a particularly sullen and emotional teenager with a big chip on his shoulder. It takes patience, and a willingness to overlook the stupid, aggressive things he says and respond to the more sensible ones instead. But there is no genuine crisis here; nobody is really looking for a fight.