

Policy Forum 04-25B: “Conference Diplomacy”, All Over Again



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"Conference Diplomacy", All Over Again

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by Nicholas Eberstadt

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I. Introduction

Nicholas Eberstadt, Henry Wendt Scholar in Political Economy at the American Enterprise Institute,

compares the recent six-party talks in Beijing over the DPRK nuclear issue with "Conference Diplomacy" in the 1930s. Eberstadt writes that "'Conference Diplomacy' only came to an end when the escalating provocations of dictators awakened the sleepers, and shredded the last remaining illusions of the would-be appeasers."

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II. Essay by Nicholas Eberstadt

"Conference Diplomacy", All Over Again
by Nicholas Eberstadt

How can we make sense of the seemingly never-ending spectacle that is the North Korean nuclear crisis-the latest chapter of which, having opened in Pyongyang in October 2002, is already well into its second year, and is set to feature yet another round of international de-nuclearization negotiations ("Six Party Talks") in Beijing later this month?

At the risk of sounding excessively Euro-centric, let me suggest an answer: we're watching "Conference Diplomacy" all over again.

"Conference Diplomacy", you will recall, was the approach to "conflict resolution" embraced by the Great Powers of Europe during the 1920s and 1930s (the era now known as "the inter-war period"). The premise underlying this peculiar mode of "diplomatic engagement" was that the international disputes of the day, even the crises, were really just disagreements between reasonable gentlemen. If those gents could only be gotten into a room together to talk things out, the wishful thinking ran, a peaceful settlement agreeable to everyone could surely be reached.

"Inter-war" Europe lurched from one crisis to the next-and each new crisis seemed to occasion another round of conference diplomacy. Every new round of conferencing was hailed as a success; every new gathering purportedly either reduced existing tensions, or settled outstanding differences completely. Typically, indeed, the fact that antagonists would agree to sit at the same table was held out as proof positive that "Conference Diplomacy" was working.

Without giving away the surprise conclusion, we can tell PG audiences that the tale of "Conference Diplomacy" is not a story with a happy ending.

How could "Conference Diplomacy"-which, as we now know, solved absolutely none of interwar Europe's security problems-have ever been allowed to string along for years on end? You have to remember the world at that time: it was a frightening place, inhabited by plenty of frightened people. The balance of power in the region had broken down, and a stable new equilibrium was not yet at hand. Ambitious and insatiable dictators were methodically taking advantage of the new playing field, rewriting the rules of the game as they saw fit. And self-deluding Western statesmen, rather than face the awful scope of the dangers gathering before their eyes, opted instead for a strategy of pretending their way out of the problems at hand: through talk, and appeasement.

That, of course, was then-and this is now. The analogy to the North Korean nuclear drama is imperfect, I will grant. But the similarities between the two situations should give pause.

The upcoming "Six Party Talks" in Beijing may be "merely" the third time that Pyongyang has sat down with its five neighbors-China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the US-to discuss the current nuclear unpleasantness. But such talks are not exactly new. North Korea has been involved in formal

off-and-on nuclear negotiations with its neighbors for nearly a decade and a half-since the 1990 talks with Seoul that culminated in the North-South "Joint Denuclearization Declaration" of 1991.

That pact, you may recall, was immediately violated by Pyongyang-like every subsequent North Korean nuclear agreement, promise, and/or pledge. And yet North Korea's negotiating partners, like the bygone gentlemen of "Conference Diplomacy", are still maintaining the pose that the next session will, somehow, be different.

This upbeat sentiment has been voiced most explicitly by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. Fresh from last month's successful foray into bilateral deliberations with North Korea ("successful" in the sense that the talks successfully established a hostage price of \$ 2 million a head for the 5 abductee children whose release from Pyongyang was secure), Koizumi happily assured the press this week that Kim Jong Il had "clearly stated that the objective" for the Dear Leader "was denuclearization". "I believe North Korea wants this to happen", he added.

(Yes, you're right-we have heard all this before, and long ago. The original English-language formulations read like this: "Mr. Hitler wants peace now".)

For its part, today's "Sixth Republic" South Korea seems intent upon re-enacting the role originally made famous by "Third Republic" France. The French inter-war appeasement policy was characterized by anxiety, opportunism, and self-deception-Seoul's contemporary North Korea policy in a nutshell.

Look only at South Korea's latest side-deal with the Dear Leader: announced just this week, to considerable jubilation in Seoul. In this Sunshine-style breakthrough, the South "loans" the North yet another 400,000 tons of rice, and the North consents to bilateral sea lane and military hotline arrangements-these latter to avoid another frightening naval clash like the June 2002 West Sea incident that sank a South Korean frigate and killed six ROK seamen.

Apparently lost upon Seoul is that the June 2002 incident, far from being an accidental tragedy, was actually a carefully planned North Korean ambush. Better lines of communication may prevent needless misunderstandings, but they are distinctly less effective against premeditated surprise attacks.

Yet even as South Korea's novitiate government boldly builds fantasy peace-castles with Pyongyang, it also fecklessly undermines its best deterrent against North Korean aggression, namely the US-ROK alliance. The announcement this week that America is planning to redeploy a third of the USFK is a sign of how bad things have gotten-and where they are heading.

(Yes, it is true that those troops are needed in Iraq at the moment, and that military readiness in Korea will not be immediately affected; but no-this wouldn't be happening today if Uncle Sam truly viewed the current South Korean government as a loyal and reliable friend.)

Say this for the inter-war French: even in their dreamiest moments of "Conference Diplomacy", they would never have dreamed of toying away an alliance with the Brits.

And what about the United States? In the era of "Conference Diplomacy", Washington proved disinterested in the growing international crisis, being distracted and preoccupied instead by other concerns (including the Great Depression). So it is again today-although Washington's current preoccupations are known as the Global War on Terror, the Iraq morass, and the re-election campaign.

Just as in an earlier day, however, Washington's current inattentiveness to a clear and present

foreign danger is earning its predictable dividends. Consider: when the Bush Administration came to office, America had one crisis on the Korean peninsula. Now, thanks to a downward spiral in US-ROK relations, it has two.

"Conference Diplomacy" only came to an end when the escalating provocations of dictators awakened the sleepers, and shredded the last remaining illusions of the would-be appeasers. Will this eventually happen in the North Korean nuclear crisis as well?

It is still too early to foretell the final chapter in the tale. As the next round of "Six Party Talks" approaches, however, it is apparent that North Korea's interlocutors have yet to awaken from their slumbers-or their illusions. For good or ill, the best that can be said at the moment is that conference diplomacy-or more precisely, its latter day variant-appears to be alive and well in Northeast Asia today.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)
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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org