

Policy Forum 04-37A: Bush's Hardline Approach to NK is Producing No Results



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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 04-37A: Bush's Hardline Approach to NK is Producing No Results", NAPSNet Policy Forum, September 30, 2004, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/0437a_sterling-html/

0437A_Sterling.html

Bush's Hardline Approach to NK is Producing No Results

PFO 04-36A: September 30, 2004

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by Harry Sterling

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I. Introduction

The following is a paper by Harry Sterling, a former diplomat and Ottawa-based commentator.

Sterling writes: "It's important for President Bush to face up to the fact that he too must be willing to be more pragmatic in dealing with North Korea if the nuclear controversy is to be resolved peacefully."

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II. Essay by Harry Sterling

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They were denounced as an axis of evil by U.S. President George W. Bush. Now, following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by the Bush administration, from Washington's standpoint Iran and North Korea still remain to be dealt with as alleged threats to the global community.

Despite the White House's sustained efforts to demonize and isolate the Marxist regime of Kim Jong-Il in Pyongyang, other countries, including South Korea, have increasingly come to believe Bush's hardline policies are not achieving the desired effect and a more pragmatic approach is far more productive.

It became evident that after Washington accused Pyongyang in October of 2002 of concealing a covert nuclear weapons program to which North Korea seemingly admitted -- and tried to internationalize the issue by drawing in China, Japan and Russia (as well South Korea) into talks with Pyongyang, the U.S.'s intransigent position of offering no concessions or inducements to North Korea unless it unilaterally terminated its nuclear program first was having little effect in persuading North Korea to be more flexible.

Accordingly, despite Washington's continued unwillingness to offer any truly meaningful gestures towards Pyongyang, including a commitment not to attack North Korea, other countries belatedly decided a more open-minded approach towards North Korea would possibly help break the logjam. In a carrot-and-stick approach to negotiations, a few carrots had to actually be offered.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi had already made an unprecedented official visit to Pyongyang. In exchange for offering North Korea humanitarian assistance, Pyongyang admitted what it had long denied, that in the 1970s and '80s it had kidnapped 11 Japanese citizens -- to familiarize North Korean intelligence agents with Japanese culture. Koizumi obtained commitments permitting the still-surviving Japanese to leave North Korea.

This May, Koizumi paid another visit to North Korea. In exchange for the release of five North Korean-born offspring of kidnapped Japanese, Koizumi promised Pyongyang \$10 million dollars US, plus 250,000 tons of food aid. (Some saw Koizumi's visit as partially intended to help his party's electoral chances in July's Upper House elections.)

For his part, South Korean president, Roh Moon-hyun, has tried since his February 2002 accession to power to continue his predecessor's policy of broadening relations with Pyongyang to reduce tension on the Korean Peninsula. This has resulted in the reopening of rail and road links closed since the 1950-53 Korean War, as well as substantial South Korean investment in special economic zones established in North Korea since the historic visit to Pyongyang of former president Kim Dae-jung in 2000.

EUROPEAN TIES

Several European Union countries have actively expanded contacts with North Korea. Many EU nations now have diplomatic missions in Pyongyang. In June, Germany established the first western cultural centre in the North Korean capital. Pyongyang has also asked Berlin to create a training centre for researchers and librarians.

In recent days, Australia's foreign minister, Alexander Downer, paid a previously unthinkable visit to Pyongyang. Downer said his government was concerned the six-party talks on North Korea's purported nuclear intentions were "stalling" and promised "substantial" benefits in Australian aid and investment if Pyongyang would abandon its nuclear programs. Britain's foreign secretary is also visiting North Korea this month.

North Korea itself has offered to freeze its nuclear program in return for economic assistance but says the Bush administration has refused to make any meaningful commitments. The Americans insist Pyongyang must commit itself to ending its nuclear program before the U.S. will also make specific commitments, not merely suspend it.

The lack of any meaningful conciliatory gestures by the Bush administration has increasingly put Washington out of step with some of the very countries it has attempted to involve in resolving the current impasse over North Korea's nuclear program. Unless President Bush alters his present uncompromising position, he runs the risk other players will simply adopt their own bilateral approach to relations with Pyongyang, as European states are doing.

Many governments have recognized that the once reclusive and enigmatic regime in North Korea is slowly changing its former erratic policies, even introducing non-Marxist economic reform measures. And despite some ups and downs in relations with South Korea, those two governments have continued to increase contacts, including marching together at the Olympics in Athens.

And even if changes initiated by Pyongyang are motivated primarily by a desire of the leadership to maintain its own grip on power, in the minds of many western governments, anything which other nations can do to promote further change would be in the long-term interests of the international community, especially if it could eventually resolve the stalemate over Pyongyang's nuclear intentions and end North Korea's potentially dangerous long-range missile program and the sale of missiles to dubious states.

It's important for President Bush to face up to the fact that he too must be willing to be more pragmatic in dealing with North Korea if the nuclear controversy is to be resolved peacefully.

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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