

Policy Forum 04-47A: We Had Power to Prevent N. Korea from Going Nuclear

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We Had Power to Prevent N. Korea from Going Nuclear

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By Peter D. Zimmerman

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I. Introduction

Peter D. Zimmerman, professor of science and security at King's College London and a former chief scientist of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, writes: "While Bush looked for nonexistent nuclear weapons in Iraq - as Condoleezza Rice suggested, to ensure that the next warning did not come as a mushroom cloud - the capability to generate plenty of mushroom clouds was being acquired by North Korea."

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II. Essay by Peter D. Zimmerman

"We Had Power to Prevent N. Korea from Going Nuclear"

By Peter D. Zimmerman

NANJING, China -Senior Chinese nuclear scientists attending an international arms control meeting in this ancient capital city, as well as senior officials and scholars in Beijing, express significant fears over the twin developments on Taiwan and in South Korea. Both countries have been caught red-handed producing enriched uranium or plutonium which can be used in nuclear weapons. Both countries are also a long way from being able to build atomic weapons. But the same Chinese scientists are even more worried about the failure of the Six Party Talks intended to end the North Korean nuclear program. They do not want yet another nuclear power on their borders; Russia and India are enough.

The question most frequently asked in Chinese scientific circles is whether the Six Party Talks, including North and South Korea, Russia, Japan, China and the United States have any chance to succeed. These are the talks of which George W. Bush appears to be so proud because he is reaching out to "form a coalition." My Chinese counterparts point out that the dispute over a nuclear North Korea, formally called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK, does not involve four of the six parties. Early on North Korea cast the issue as a simple one between the United States and itself, and it has stuck to that formula.

What North Korea wants, and the Chinese impressed this on me most strongly, is some kind of normal relations with the United States along with a pledge that the United States will not invade the DPRK. In principle, these should have been easy for the United States to grant. Diplomatic recognition does not state that the United States approves of a government; it merely says that we acknowledge that the government controls a specific piece of land, and that we will talk to that government should problems arise. As to the security pledge, it's obvious that we have no intention of going to war on the Korean Peninsula for a second time, so long as the DPRK does not attack our ally, South Korea. North Korea's immense artillery formations along the Demilitarized Zone could pulverize Seoul, the South Korean capital city, in a matter of hours, no matter what the United States did short of a major nuclear first strike practically on the city limits of Seoul.

Among the NATO nations, the United States stands practically alone in refusing to extend diplomatic recognition to North Korea. Most of our closest friends and allies, including France, Britain, Canada and Germany, accredit ambassadors to Pyongyang.

In the fall of 2002, long before the North Koreans broke the seals placed on its nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency and months before they ejected the IAEA's inspectors, the DPRK stated officially and publicly that it would agree to a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, if the United States would discuss the outstanding issues face to face.

Face-to-face negotiations are precisely what George W. Bush rejects. His first state visitor after he was sworn in in 2001 was Kim Dae Jung, then-president of South Korea and a Nobel Peace Prize winner for his attempts to build bridges to the North. Secretary of State Colin Powell, after meeting with President Kim, announced that the United States would continue to support Kim Dae Jung's "sunshine policy" toward the DPRK and would continue the Clinton administration's policy of openness to both countries. A few hours later, President Kim had met with Bush and been told that because the U.S. president "loathed" Kim Jong Il, the mercurial and sometimes very oddly behaving "Dear Leader" of North Korea, American support for the sunshine policy and the Clinton policy was withdrawn.

While Bush was focusing on spurious intelligence to spur the United States to war with Iraq, Pyongyang was desperately sending signals that it did not particularly want to reprocess the plutonium in its nuclear reactor, but that U.S. actions were forcing just such a decision. While the Bush administration looked high and low for a nonexistent Iraqi nuclear program, Kim Jong Il's scientists were preparing to reprocess plutonium, ordering the chemicals and, finally, ejecting the IAEA inspectors from its Yong Byong nuclear installation.

The Bush administration, its attention on Iraq to the exclusion of real problems, failed to do much to meet North Korea even a quarter of the way. In the end, all the Bush team could do was convene six nations, at least three of which were impotent when it came to solving the bilateral problem with North Korea, and hold three meetings, none of which made much progress.

While Bush looked for nonexistent nuclear weapons in Iraq - as Condoleezza Rice suggested, to ensure that the next warning did not come as a mushroom cloud - the capability to generate plenty of mushroom clouds was being acquired by North Korea.

I cannot guess the probable outcome had the Bush administration continued the Clinton administration's initiatives on North Korea. The DPRK is a very difficult negotiating partner, and even their principal friends, the Chinese, agree. But I cannot imagine that we would have been worse off with bilateral negotiations and a few small concessions made by the United States. It would have hurt nothing to try. Indeed, my Chinese counterparts still urge such a course with China acting to interpret honestly each side's problems with the other. North Korea is now a nuclear power, with four to six nuclear usable weapons assembled on Bush's watch - built only after the DPRK told us exactly what we could have done to prevent it.

Without question, George W. Bush has failed the American people and put them and their Northeast Asian friends in harm's way so that he could avoid talking in one direction while starting an unnecessary war in the other. His statement during the third presidential debate that Six Party Talks on North Korea were better than bilateral talks because more nations were involved was self-serving and duplicitous. After all, he refused any kind of multilateral diplomacy concerning Iraq.

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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