

Policy Forum 05-64A: Bush Policy Backfiring in Asia

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By Leon V. Sigal

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I. Introduction

Leon V. Sigal, director of the Northeast Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in New York and editor of *The North Korean Nuclear Crisis: Regional Perspectives*, wrote: "far from isolating North Korea, the United States is itself becoming odd man out in the region. If this misguided course had a name, it would be hawk disengagement."

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II. Essay by Leon V. Sigal

- Bush Policy Backfiring in Asia
by Leon V. Sigal

Now that North Korea has returned to six-party talks, the question remains, will the Bush administration continue to watch Pyongyang arm without trying to do what South Korea and Japan think just might get it to stop: sustained diplomatic give and take?

Most hard-liners in the administration are unilateralists who could care less what allies think. Negotiating is anathema to them. Others take it on faith that North Korea is determined to arm, not deal, and believe that a nuclear-arming Pyongyang will drive Seoul and Tokyo further into Washington's arms.

The administration insists that six-party talks are further isolating North Korea and that pressure by China and others will bring it to heel. With a negotiated resolution viewed as desirable and possible in South Korea and Japan, however, administration misplaying of North Korea is threatening to unravel US alliances in Northeast Asia and enhance China's influence in the region.

South Korea's refusal to ratchet up pressure on the North is dismissed by some Bush administration officials as the handiwork of left-leaning former dissidents in the Roh Moo Hyun government and by others as just a passing political phase in Seoul. They disregard growing misgivings of most South Koreans that Washington's uncompromising stance is impeding North-South reconciliation.

Administration high-handedness with Seoul could not have come at a less opportune time. After a century of being more acted upon than actor on the world stage, South Korea has arisen from the ashes of war to become the world's 11th-largest economy.

Less than two decades after throwing off the shackles of dictatorship, it is a thriving democracy with a politically attentive populace. National self-confidence and assertiveness are on the rise as a new generation of Koreans who did not suffer through deprivation, occupation, war, and dictatorship are rejecting their elders' deference to and dependency on outsiders.

Administration officials profess to be heartened by Japan's willingness to toughen its stance toward North Korea and take other steps to strengthen its alliance with the United States. Convinced that pro-American officials are in the ascendancy in Tokyo, they talk about turning Japan into "the Britain of the Far East." They mistake Japan's display of loyalty for fealty.

Japanese policy circles roughly fall into five schools of thought. The Americanists want to bind Japan more tightly to the United States, partly to hedge against the rise of China. They are a force in the Foreign Ministry and dominate Japan's Defense Agency, which can be counted on to support almost anything the Pentagon wants.

They have allies of sorts among internationalists who want Japan to be freer to engage more actively in collective security under a UN mandate.

Among the Americanists' rivals are Asia-firsters who view Japan's future as tied to Asia economically and politically and favor development of multilateral institutions to bind a rising China into a web of cooperation. To Asia-firsters, Japan has a triangular relationship with the United States and China.

While not rejecting close ties with Washington, they want better relations with Beijing as well, and they worry that US aggressiveness on North Korea or Taiwan could entrap Japan in an unwanted confrontation with China.

A fourth group, Japan's Gaullists, distrust US reliability and judgment and exploit US demands to enhance Japan's capacity for independent political and military action. To their right is a fifth school, neonationalists like Tokyo's governor, Ishihara Shintaro, who want Japan to look after its own security, unbound by the alliance with the United States.

An Americanist, Prime Minister Koizumi has publicly embraced President Bush, committing yen and troops to an unpopular war in Iraq, suppressing technical and political doubts to cooperate on missile defense, and tightening the integration of Japanese and US armed forces. Yet, to judge from his two summit meetings in three years with North Korea's Kim Jong Il, his display of loyalty had a purpose: to deflect Washington from confrontation with Pyongyang and Beijing that could cause a fatal breach in his party and his government.

If Koizumi's balancing act fails, the ultimate beneficiaries of US policy toward North Korea may not be those who would bind Japan more tightly to the United States but Asia-firsters, Gaullists, and nationalists who want to loosen those ties.

US hard-liners would rather pick a fight with China than negotiate with North Korea. They demand that Beijing pressure Pyongyang to capitulate to Washington's demands. Yet why would China ever cut off food and oil supplies and jeopardize the North Korean regime's survival? After all, China has been the chief beneficiary of the administration's refusal to deal.

In the 1990s Beijing watched warily on the sidelines as Pyongyang wooed Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. It feared that Pyongyang was moving to legitimate the US military presence in Korea or, worse, become a US ally. That was all but inconceivable to Washington, which looked to Beijing for help with Pyongyang.

While Beijing's willingness to pressure Pyongyang became a litmus test for hard-liners spoiling for confrontation with China, the need for Beijing's help with Pyongyang was the main justification for officials favoring accommodation with China. Either way, the United States has put China back into the game with North Korea, as quarterback no less, in a position to enhance its influence in the region by playing well with others -- not to pressure Pyongyang, but to get Washington to deal.

Far from isolating North Korea, the United States is itself becoming odd man out in the region. If this misguided course had a name, it would be hawk disengagement.

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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