

Policy Forum 06-104: Dead Talks Walking; North Korea and Removing the Bomb

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Article by Glyn Ford

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I. Introduction

Glyn Ford, Member of the European Parliament and part of the Parliament's Delegation for the Korean Peninsula, writes, "Pyongyang and Washington agree on one thing, that you can't trust the

other. And they're both right. Any final solution requires both sides' agreement, but not enthusiasm. The nuclear package could be put together with South Korean money, Russian technology and Chinese political will."

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II. Article by Glyn Ford

- Dead Talks Walking; North Korea and Removing the Bomb
by Glyn Ford

North Korea will return to the table in Beijing in December and the Six Party Talks brokered by China will recommence after a fifteen month hiatus with the two Korea's, the US, Japan and Russia in attendance. Yet unless President Bush makes a sharp turn of direction the prospects for a solution are bleak. The North has returned to talks it abandoned in late 2005 after the September 19th Joint Statement that was portrayed at the time as a breakthrough. But in fact it was the papering over an enormous division between the two main protagonists. Complete Verifiable Irreversible Disarmament would only be acceptable to Pyongyang in exchange for an end to US hostility and a new indigenous supply of power.

For the North the reference to negotiations on the supply of a nuclear power plant at the appropriate time meant 'now', while the US read 'never'. It might have kept the North from testing its nuclear bomb for a few more rounds of inconclusive talking, but it was a pause not a plan. As it turned out the ink was barely dry before, from a North Korean perspective, the US demonstrated their continued hostility and unilateralism. They forced North's bank of choice in Macau to freeze their assets on the grounds the North was money laundering.

In light of the earlier Joint Statement screwing it up for \$24M, small change for American organised crime, is either stupidity or conspiracy. The North chose to interpret it as the latter. So off they went on the road to demonstrating their nuclear credentials and on October 9th got half way there with an underground nuclear test that was a whimper rather than a bang, yielding a blast of only 1000 tonnes of TNT a quarter of that forecast. Nevertheless demonstrating to the World they had, as long suspected, both the plutonium and the technology even if this first time they failed to marry them perfectly together.

The US claims under pressure from the consequent UN Security Council Resolution 1718 which imposed a further tier of sanctions over both the half century long US embargo and the unilateral financial freeze Pyongyang has come back to the table. In reality it's a mixture of Chinese anger and the North Koreans achieving their aim by upping the ante and demonstrably going nuclear and US concessions that has brought the North back. While the Prime Minister walked to work for a while to show the North's resolve, the thronging Tong-il Market shows little sign of panic buying of food. Instead the US has agreed to establish a Working Group within the restarted talks to remove the unilateral financial sanctions.

The problem is this while this will keep the North at the table it does little to close the gap between the two sides. As an Axis of Evil country that coincidentally had a high-level Delegation in Teheran meeting with President Ahmadinejad in mid-November, one of the more enthusiastic consumers of its short and medium range missile, it will take some convincing that the US leopard has changed its spots. They are looking for complete verifiable irreversible suspension of US hostility, both military and economic towards them and a nuclear package deal.

Neither can be the result of a bilateral deal. Pyongyang and Washington agree on one thing, that you can't trust the other. And they're both right. Any final solution requires both sides' agreement, but not enthusiasm. The nuclear package could be put together with South Korean money, Russian technology and Chinese political will. The South is just too petrified of a shotgun reunification to do otherwise, will the Russians were keen right back at the beginning to sell their nuclear technology for Northern consumption.

As for the Chinese they want to avoid a regional arms race, which will be triggered if in response to the North Korean 'threat' Japan goes ahead and deploys Theatre Missile Defence. This will, at the same time, neutralise China's offensive capability forcing them to multiply its 20 ICBM's by an order of magnitude and probably fit them with Multiple Independent Re-entry Vehicles. With a booming civilian economy about to make the global grade the last thing the Chinese want is a repeat of the late sixties when in response to the threat from the Soviet Union they increased Military spending by 80% between 1968 - 71 seriously distorting the economy and slowing the recovery from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution.

But while the rest of the World realises the dangers of a misstep on the Peninsula there are powerful forces in Tokyo and Washington who want the sword of Damocles to hang a little longer. In Japan a revision of the US imposed Constitution to remove the 'Peace' clause will only work with a fearful public and North Korea provides that fear. In the US politicians and military-industrial complex selling 'Star Wars' know that Taliban technologists will not produce the ICBNM or a nuclear warhead. If North Korea wasn't there they would have to be invented.

Yet there is a way that will not remove US hostility but rather tame it. That is by providing multiple guarantors of any settlement. The clever thing for China and the two Korea's to do now is to widen rather than narrow the number of participants, even if at least initially they only have observer status. They might force Japan and the US from their procrastination as well as give the North Koreans the confidence to start the long march to a comprehensive settlement.

First on the invitation list should be the EU. As the Pyongyang's most serious interlocutors not already present and providers of half a billion euros of financial assistance to North Korea over the past few years the EU has the financial and political muscle to make the difference.

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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