

Discussion of NAPSNet Forum #21- North Korea's Underground Construction



The NAPSNet Policy Forum provides expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia. As always, we invite your responses to this report and hope you will take the opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis.

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Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network

DISCUSSION OF "NORTH KOREA'S UNDERGROUND CONSTRUCTION"

#21B -- October 13, 1998

The is intended to provide expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia, and an opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis. The Forum is open to all participants of the [Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network \(NAPSNet\)](#) . As always, NAPSNet invites your responses to this report. Please see ["NAPSNet Invites Your Responses,"](#) below, and send your responses to the NAPSNet Coordinator at: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org .

DISCUSSION OF "THINK AGAIN: NONPROLIFERATION"

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I. Response from Roy Kim

[Ed. note: The following comments are by [Dr. Roy Kim](#) , Professor of International Politics and Economics, Drexel University, and President of the Stanton Asian Development Co.]

Dr. Quinones' lengthy essay is very useful contribution on the most confused and controversial situation in Washington regarding the DPRK. Ken is one of the most experienced Korean specialists who after several decades left the US Government and now heads the Asia Foundation. Unfortunately, there are not many such well-trained Koreanists left in the US Government. It's no wonder why Don Oberdorfer frequently cites Ken in his impressive THE TWO KOREAS.

Ken's essay is well-balanced, based on actual field observations, and a thoughtful analysis. On several occasions he shared his views with me in Washington and even in Pyongyang, as we saw each other on several occasions in the DPRK.

Based on my two dozen trips to the DPRK and actual business dealings with DPRK officials, I share much of Ken's observations. The only exception I take with him is his characterization of "optimists" and "pessimists." What Ken describes as "optimists" are actually "realists," and those he labels "pessimists" are wishful thinkers and "obstructionists" in reality. This reminds me of my lengthy conversation with a US-trained top national security officer of the Kim Young-sam Government in the 1980s. He was sure that the DPRK would collapse "immediately" after Castro's demise. With so many Cuban refugees coming to Florida, he was sure Castro's Cuba would go under and next would be Kim Il-sung's DPRK. While both countries are under difficult conditions to be sure, Castro's Cuba is still in existence, as well as the DPRK.

Fortunately, the Kim Dae-jung Government today provides Washington with much more accurate information on the DPRK by the most experienced people, like Lim Dong-won and Kang In-duk. Of course, how much such information is used and by whom are entirely different questions.

Ken is right on the underground constructions. The DPRK realizes that it must be fully prepared, no matter how difficult its circumstances, for another military confrontation so long as the US maintains troops in South Korea and frequently engages in joint military exercises near and around the Demilitarized Zone.

An important area Ken failed to mention is how much DPRK feels pains from the US-imposed economic sanctions. To be sure, lifting sanctions may not cause a rush of massive US investment into the DPRK. But the DPRK maintains that its efforts to establish several free economic zones have not been successful under the sanctions.

For Ken's information, the two-lane (not four-lane) highway has been completed between Pyongyang

and Myohyangsan without a single stoplight. And the huge Friendship Exhibition in Hyangsan has now completed its annex to display foreign gifts to Kim Jong-il.

II. Response by Paul Cleveland

[Ed. note: The following response is by Paul Cleveland, Former United States Representative to the Korean Energy Development Organization.]

My congratulations to Ken Quinones for his balanced presentation of the publicly known facts regarding the supposed DPRK nuclear site. While my own incomplete understanding of what has been going on there leads me to lean a bit more toward the pessimistic side than Ken seems to, his conclusion is precisely right: inspection of the site is essential. As a first step in that direction, as many senior Korean watchers have been advocating for several months now, we quickly need to appoint a high level Korean negotiator such as former Secretary Perry who will: a) have credibility and demand respect from both the North Koreans and the Congress of the United States; b) hopefully keep them (and us) from each others' throats; and c) get us back on the long, tortuous road to lessened tensions on the peninsula.

III. Response by Joel S. Wit

[Ed note: The following response is by Joel S. Wit, Senior Associate, at the Henry L. Stimson Center. Mr. Wit is currently on leave from the US State Department, where he was in charge of implementing the US-DPRK Agreed Framework since 1995.]

I am currently on leave from the US State Department for a year where, since 1995, I was in charge of implementing the US-DPRK Agreed Framework. I helped formulate that agreement in 1994 as a Senior Advisor to Ambassador at-Large Robert L. Gallucci when he was in charge of our North Korea policy. During my tenure as the official in charge of implementing the Agreed Framework, one of my responsibilities was to make sure that the DPRK was adhering to its obligations with regard to its nuclear weapons program. In that capacity, I had extensive and frequent discussions with DPRK officials in charge of its nuclear program as well as visits to the Yonbyon nuclear facility.

While I agree with Dr. Quinones's assertion that there are many individuals inside the US intelligence community who probably would like the Agreed Framework to disappear, it is my view that these reports are much more serious than the transparent effort of some individuals to overturn a policy which they oppose. Let me hasten to add that, since I have been on sabbatical since March 1998, I have not been privy to any classified information over the past six months. But it is my impression that these recent reports are being taken seriously even by those government officials who have worked hardest to implement the Agreed Framework and who support a policy of engagement with North Korea. Moreover, I would not assume that these reports are solely based on satellite pictures of what, at the moment, is probably just a hole in the ground. Everyone knows the DPRK is constantly building underground facilities for a variety of reasons. Moreover, there has been past speculation about possible underground nuclear facilities; the most recent previous report was leaked to the New York Times earlier this year. But these past reports were eventually discounted. That has not happened in the wake of this most recent press leak.

How should the US government handle this most recent problem? The focus of most analysts has been on how to deal with this alleged construction of an underground nuclear facility. Dr. Quinones talks about the need for an on-the-spot visit. The problem is that an on-the-spot visit at this time would probably reveal nothing. If press reports are to be believed, the DPRK is just at the very

beginning of building this underground facility and it may not be completed for five to eight years. Thus, an on-the-spot visit would only reveal a big hole in the ground and would only give the DPRK further ammunition to deny these press reports. Unfortunately, what is probably needed is the right to visit this site at least annually for some time to come. Such a right is likely to be extremely difficult to secure given North Korea's strongly held view that inspections of this sort would compromise its sovereignty and its opposition to allowing the IAEA to conduct "anywhere, anytime" visits.

Even more important, this recent development only highlights continuing fears that the DPRK is conducting a secret nuclear weapons program. Those fears have been fed by the lack of DPRK cooperation with the United States and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in preparing for an eventual examination of how much plutonium it produced before the 1994 agreement was concluded. Let me emphasize that the North has been cooperating with the US and the IAEA, for the most part, in freezing its nuclear weapons program as specified in the Agreed Framework. And it took some limited steps earlier this year at the request of the United States, before the current crisis began, to preserve some additional, important historical information. But overall, its cooperation has been poor; IAEA-DPRK meetings have made almost no progress since 1995 and those meetings have become less and less frequent. I would argue that now is the right time to engage the North Koreans, not only on the alleged construction of the underground nuclear facility but also on this issue of preserving historical information and "nuclear confidence building" in general.

On the potential underground facility, we need to secure the right to at least yearly visits until the KEDO nuclear reactors are completed at the beginning of the next century. We also need to establish some sort of compliance mechanism, similar to those in US-Soviet arms control agreements, where the two sides can meet regularly to discuss their concerns. And we need to emphasize to the North that, if there are future serious reports of other possible facilities like those frozen in the Agreed Framework, we may need to visit them as well. On preserving historical information, the North needs to begin a process of gradually preserving information so, when the time comes, the examination of the DPRK's nuclear past can take place as quickly as possible and give all the participants as much confidence as possible that its results are accurate.

We may be kidding ourselves that the North will agree to our demands even if we offer nothing in return. I believe there is something we can offer in return which would help us secure our objectives. The US should work closely with the Republic of Korea, Japan, and the European Union to accelerate the KEDO reactor project. The original target date for completion of that project was 2003 but has now slipped to 2006-2007. The North has complained bitterly about this slippage and has used it constantly as justification for not cooperating with the IAEA. We should seek to restore the project schedule to one as close as possible to the original target date. Some of this may be done through a thorough reexamination of the current project plan. Also, we need to look closely at the option of whether any long-lead time items already built or under construction are available for the KEDO reactors as a result of the current economic slowdown in South Korea. Finally, if necessary, the KEDO Executive Board members should consider providing additional funding for the project if it will help cut the schedule.

I would emphasize that acceleration of the KEDO reactor project is also in our own best interests. Too much of the discussion of this project over the past few years has focused on financial and commercial issues, two important trees in a bigger forest. The importance of the project is that it is leverage which allows us to secure our ultimate and most important objective--determining the overall scope of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. It is abundantly clear that the sooner we do that, the better for all concerned. Moreover, moving up the project schedule will also allow us to remove from North Korea the 25-30 kilograms of plutonium we know exists in the 8,000 fuel rods

currently stored under IAEA monitoring in that country. It also allows us to begin the dismantling of the existing nuclear facilities sooner. (Under the Agreed Framework, the DPRK is required to begin both these steps once the first reactor is completed.)

All of these steps will be critical in bolstering the nuclear component of the Agreed Framework. But, unfortunately, they may not be sufficient in and of themselves to help salvage the agreement. Since the situation has been allowed to become extremely serious, I believe that they will only be possible in the context of a broader deal between the US and North Korea which propels forward normalization of our political and economic relationship. Without such a new bargain, dealing with North Korea's nuclear program and its other activities which threaten us, like its ballistic missile program, is likely to be impossible.

II. NAPSNet 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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