

Discussion of “Pyongyang Raises the Stakes”



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Discussion of "Pyongyang Raises the Stakes"

by Ralph A. Cossa

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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay "Pyongyang Raises the Stakes" by Ralph Cossa, president of the Pacific Forum CSIS, a Honolulu-based non-profit research institute affiliated with the Center

for Strategic and International Studies, which appeared as Policy Forum Online 05-17A: March 11, 2005.

This report includes comments by Rupert Atkinson, an interested observer.

II. Comments on Essay by Ralph Cossa

1. Comments by Rupert Atkinson

It is easy to say 'what should' be done', but far harder to say 'how it should be done'. To move from the 'what' to the 'how' we need to understand the true situation. I am no expert and can offer little advice, but I have lived in South Korea for the last ten years and always have an ear-up for anything related to the North as it is just such an 'interesting' place.

Living and working in South Korea the reality-on-the-ground is that no one wants war; everyone wants the by-no-means-limited trade with the North to continue as is. Such murmur is the rule, and from what I can gather, there is considerable behind the scenes effort, from the top down, to downplay the frequent craziness drifting from North to South (and also to downplay craziness they see emanating from the US). Don't ROK the boat -- see, hear, speak no evil is the accepted norm. Accordingly, expecting South Korea to actually do anything that would annoy the North is to expect too much. Why? Because rattling the North gets them nothing, and the more the North becomes dependent on the South for trade, so in turn the South becomes dependent on the North. These days I meet more and more people, that is ordinary people, who even seem to fear unification and what it might bring.

President Bush likes to say he keeps all options on the table (a hidden threat of War), but to South Korea, the hidden option, War, is not one it chooses to brandish. In this sense, the US and South Korea are divided and North Korea knows it. President Roh said that he would not tolerate nukes but the fact is, he probably never expected the North to make such bold claims compromising his position adopted to satisfy American ears, thus his present predicament. He is now faced with the prospect of having to tolerate nukes - what else can he do? Whether the sanction road is followed or not is dependent both upon his belief that the nuke threat (threat of attack, not of having) is real, and how he feels present North South trade to be important.

North Korea is responding as a cornered cat, as usual. Both Japan and the US have recently upped the ante and if South Korea joins in who knows what will happen. The only possible savior for North Korea will be China, or possibly Russia; one or both may step in. This would be a direct stab to the US and could forever thwart any Korean future dream of unification.

2. Response by Ralph Cossa

I have little argument with Mr. Atkinson's characterization of "the true situation" in the ROK. I certainly agree that no one there wants a war; a characteristic Koreans share with Americans, including the current administration (which is seldom given credit for this fact). It is a stretch to say, however, that "everyone" wants the "by-no-means-limited trade" with the North to continue. There is a growing number of Koreans, including but not limited to the conservatives, who feel that the leverage the South has gained should be more effectively applied and even the government has pledged no major new economic projects until the nuclear issue is resolved -- a step in the right direction consistent with the arguments in my article.

"Everyone" also wants the North to rejoin the Six-Party Talks but Pyongyang as "temporarily suspended" their participation and now claims to have nuclear weapons, which, if true, presumably crosses President Roh's red line. All I suggest is that the ROK also "temporarily suspend" economic handouts until the North provides an explanation to Seoul (and the others) about its statements and intentions.

I would not accept the presumption that the North and South are equally dependent on one another, as the author implies. There is no need for Seoul to "speak evil" of the North (and Washington could further tone down its own rhetoric, although this appears to finally be happening). But the fear of offending the North by asking them to honor previous pledges or to explain their threats, does not appear unreasonable and failure to do so just gives Pyongyang a green light to continue their unacceptable behavior.

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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