Policy Forum 05-75A: Food Aid to North Korea or How to Ride a Trojan Horse to Death

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By Ruediger Frank

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I. Introduction

Ruediger Frank, a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Korea University, Seoul, writes: "And so, it comes as no surprise to read in the Chosun Ilbo …that the World Food Program was asked to shut down its Pyongyang office…We know what happens next. The North Koreans will be accused of not being grateful, the South Koreans will be told that it is their fault, the already not-so united front of the five nations at the Six Party Talks will be further weakened, and the North Korean leadership will open a bottle of Champaign."

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II. Essay by Ruediger Frank

- Food Aid to North Korea or How to Ride a Trojan Horse to Death
by Ruediger Frank

One would think that after the last decade of intensive contacts, most people dealing with North Korean officials have finally understood that these men and women are neither maniac nor irrational, but rather highly professional and well motivated. Yet to not everyone is ready to treat them as such.

Food aid is one sad example. Why would any state-educated North Korean, who after decades of anti-capitalist training is constantly on alert, seriously believe that countries which make their distaste for the regime and its leaders more than clear almost on a daily basis are ready to provide any kind of assistance without strings attached - even if they actually were? After all, this technique is at least as old and as well publicized as Greek mythology and the Trojan Horse. Consequentially, a deep sense of suspicion on the North Korean side has to be expected and can indeed be observed.

Against this serious drawback, dozens of NGOs and their staff have worked hard - much harder than is publicly recognized - for years to convince the North Koreans at various levels by words and by deeds that they just want to help, that they are sincere, and that humanitarianism is deeply imbedded in our culture. And I would like to believe that these efforts were not at all fruitless, that in addition to alleviating the burden of millions of vulnerable people they created a fragile although certainly not overly huge amount of trust.

Unfortunately, we might probably never know whether this shrinking violet ever grew because it was trampled down under the heavy boots of Cold War warriors who neither seem to really respect the work of humanitarian aid organizations as such, nor have the necessary patience to wait until their own strategy produces results. The latter is truly surprising. Imagine the old Greeks staging a demonstration in front of Troja's walls complaining that the ingrate Trojans only pulled one wooden horse inside their city instead of two, and that they haven't placed the horse in front of the city's barracks so that the Greek soldiers hidden inside can disarm the Trojan defenders without having to walk too far.

At this point, it must be stated that I do NOT believe that the NGOs in North Korea were acting as Western spies or as agents of regime change, and this is of course where the Trojan Horse analogy is wrong. Their staff worked meticulously to help suffering people and were not intending much more. However, it would be naive to expect that the North Koreans ever fully believed that, as would be to think the Western intelligence community would not have attempted to misuse the unique access the NGOs have to this white spot on the world map. The pressure is high; the 2005 report on

Iraqi intelligence failures heavily criticizes the "absence of reliable human intelligence sources inside both countries [Iraq and North Korea]" (available here).

The North Koreans must always have suspected that Western aid would come at a dear price. Yet at one point, because of the dire situation of their economy and after a severe famine, they had no choice but to accept this aid and the conditions under which is was provided. Among other humanitarian organizations, the WFP was allowed to establish an office in North Korea that now has over 40 staff who regularly monitor 158 out of 203 counties, with an average of 500 field trips a month (available here). One would think that Western secret services just can't believe their luck and try to behave as inconspicuously as possible to keep this unique potential well of detailed and first-hand intelligence sputtering as long as they can.

However, there are voices in America that find it appropriate to demand that all food aid going to North Korea be channeled exclusively through the WFP (see this article and special envoy Jay Lefkovitz' hint at linking food aid to human rights at this URL). They heavily criticize South Korea and China for not doing so, and for thereby undermining efforts to use food aid as a stick in an unsophisticated, unidimensional quid-pro-quo game. Rather than understanding that only this diversification of the sources and methods of foreign assistance made the WFP's and the other NGO's work easier acceptable for Pyongyang, they demand a de facto monopolization of food aid by a single organization. Nobel price winning Kim Dae-jung's words about the importance of engagement seem to be gone with the wind.

The frustration about the seeming lack of progress is as understandable as it is noble, although many observers do report changes and some expectations are simply unrealistic in scope and speed. The monopolization of aid in the hands of just one organization is a rational demand, but can it survive a reality check? Such a move would strongly increase the humiliating public awareness of the North Korean aid receivership. Most importantly, it would lead to the country's dependency - the word alone is like a red rag to Koreans - on one exclusive source of aid which could then be turned it into a weapon in, for example, the Six Party Talks. That is at least how Pyongyang in all likelihood perceives the whole issue.

Would the North Koreans just sit by and watch how their declared adversaries dig a tunnel under their fortress? They would be dangerously irrational if they remained passive. Not all leaders in North Korea have loved the presence of the WFP in their country and its intense monitoring anyway, so they might be just glad for this opportunity to get rid of it. And so, it comes as no surprise to read in the Chosun Ilbo (read the article here) that the World Food Program was asked to shut down its Pyongyang office. The remaining hope is that this will turn out to be only half the truth, as it was the case earlier this year when the announced closure of the OCHA office did not take place.

We know what happens next. The North Koreans will be accused of not being grateful, the South Koreans will be told that it is their fault, the already not-so united front of the five nations at the Six Party Talks will be further weakened, and the North Korean leadership will open a bottle of Champaign. The status quo will have been preserved once again for a few more months or years. Those who say the categorical demand for perfect monitoring was well intended but not wise will, if lucky, be described as naive and told not to forget who actually is evil and that it would be unthinkable to reward bad behavior. This might all be true - but meanwhile, the people in the North will continue to live under unchanged conditions, and we will know less about it.

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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