

Policy Forum 05-80A: Hide and Seek with Kim Jong Il

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By Henry Sokolski

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I. Introduction

Henry Sokolski, the executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center in Washington, D.C. and former Deputy for Nonproliferation Policy in the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense from 1989 to 1993, writes, "...the U.S. will not even discuss providing light-water reactors until Pyongyang completely disarms and rejoins the NPT. Still, the deeper negotiators delve

into the endless issues that must be resolved to disarm Pyongyang, the clearer the dangers and costs of doing so are likely to become."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by Henry Sokolski

- Hide and Seek with Kim Jong Il
by Henry Sokolski

In my office, next to photographs of me shaking hands with my former bosses Dan Quayle and Dick Cheney, is a framed color photograph of a half-completed light-water nuclear-power reactor located in Shinpo, North Korea. The project was part of a deal President Bill Clinton struck in 1994 to get Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear-fuel-making (and bomb-making) capacity and to come into full compliance with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Personally signed by the project's last serving director, U.S. Ambassador Charles Kartman, the picture is inscribed with his "best wishes and greatest respect." He mailed it to me last month as one of his last official acts.

I had it framed and hung. I felt vindicated. I had been fighting this venture for more than a decade. The project was unsafe, never made economic or technical sense and set a bizarre nonproliferation precedent-it began construction of a reactor that could make many bombs' worth of plutonium while suspending routine international inspections of North Korea's nuclear activities designed to prevent proliferation. Pyongyang, moreover, blew the deal apart late in 2002 when it revealed it was building a covert uranium enrichment plant. For these reasons, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced in July that the reactor project would "cease to exist."

Her announcement, along with the picture, made me confident that the project was finally dead. This feeling didn't last long. Last week, after the 20-day fourth round of the six-party talks, the White House announced a new understanding between the U.S. and North Korea that "respects" Pyongyang's right to "peaceful nuclear energy" and assured discussion of the "provision of light-water reactor[s]" to North Korea.

Besides threatening to deflate my trophy case, this deal is dangerous on several counts. It assumes that if North Korea were allowed light-water power plants, the presence of international inspectors would preclude illicit bomb-making. But a study completed last year by my organization (the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center in Washington, D.C.) detailed how a country such as North Korea could divert spent or fresh reactor fuel from a large light-water reactor to a small, hidden reprocessing or enrichment plant without inspectors finding out in time to block the material from being made into bombs. The U.S. State Department validated the report's detailed scenarios by asking that I censor key specifics. Diverting fresh reactor fuel, the study concluded, could reduce the effort needed to make bomb-grade uranium five-fold, while after little more than a year of operation, the reactor would contain sufficient plutonium in its spent fuel to make 50 or more reliable nuclear bombs.

Second, respecting the peaceful nuclear rights of such an egregious cheater as Pyongyang can hardly help the international campaign to dissuade Iran from building nuclear weapons under the cover of an energy program. As one Indian security analyst put it, "Why should India back Washington's effort to refer Iran's nuclear misbehavior to the United Nations?" North Korea withdrew from the NPT, made bombs, and has a covert uranium enrichment program it denies exists-yet Washington has affirmed its right to nuclear power plants. Why not treat Iran-an NPT

member with an internationally inspected, overt enrichment program-the same?

Third, the chances of the North Korean regime surrendering its nuclear-weapon capabilities or of inspectors ferreting them all out are virtually nil. Kim Jong Il is unlikely to stay in power by dint of his popularity at home or abroad. Having atomic bombs, though, helps. Why, then, did Kim commit to give them up last week? He knows what we don't know about his nuclear program and is banking on us not learning much.

Consider his enriched-uranium-bomb project. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf testified to Pyongyang's receipt of assistance from Pakistan's uranium-enrichment guru, A.Q. Khan. But Pyongyang denies having a program, and U.S. intelligence agencies don't know where or how many enrichment plants exist. It's unlikely inspectors could operate any more freely in North Korea than they did in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. There's no good way to locate Kim's nukes using special technology. Inspectors will have to ask the regime to learn more, and Kim is sure to demand that the U.S. make concessions for every answer. In this game, Pyongyang's deck will always be larger than ours.

Clearly, Condi Rice knows this. That's why she says the U.S. will not even discuss providing light-water reactors until Pyongyang completely disarms and rejoins the NPT. Still, the deeper negotiators delve into the endless issues that must be resolved to disarm Pyongyang, the clearer the dangers and costs of doing so are likely to become. As long as that's the case, the reactor picture on my wall stays up.

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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