Policy Forum 06-55A: Kim Jong Il vs George W. Bush: American National Security in the Balance

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Essay by Desaix Anderson

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I. Introduction

Desaix Anderson, who served for thirty-five years as a Foreign Service Officer at the U.S. State Department, working in and on Asian issues, was Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific (1989-92) and executive director of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) for over three years, writes, "Rather than 'staying the course,' President Bush should move quickly past the UN resolution on the rockets, put the best face possible on these developments, rein in his hardliners, appoint a full-time, high-level, fully empowered Coordinator for the Korean Peninsula, and instruct the Coordinator and rest of the Bush government to work urgently, patiently, flexibly, and innovatively to achieve a comprehensive solution to the North Korean nuclear and missile issues."

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II. Essay by Desaix Anderson

- Kim Jong Il vs George W. Bush: American National Security in the Balance
by Desaix Anderson

North Korea's Kim Jong Il is a ruthless dictator, reckless in his pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, defiant and maddeningly provocative, as in his rocketry display on July the Fourth. Moreover, he is clearly in no hurry to reach an accord on nuclear weapons in the Six-Party Talks since, as Washington fiddles, Kim is merrily producing fissile material for nuclear bombs, probably six to ten during President Bush's tenure, trying to build nuclear devices miniaturized sufficiently to affix to his Taepodong-2 ballistic missiles, and perfecting those missiles for intercontinental delivery. But in this stand-off, he is joined at the hip with George W. Bush.

Based on his "conservative" ideological principles that divide the world into good and evil camps, President Bush refused to pursue the promising missile talks of the Clinton era; ended the productive ongoing dialogue with Pyongyang that might have aborted Kim Jong Il's highly enriched uranium project; and refused to negotiate with the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) until finally he found a means in the Six-Party Talks to shroud his distaste for talking with evil, camouflaging the United States interaction with North Korea at a table of six sides with South Koreans, Chinese, Russians, and Japanese joining North Koreans and Americans in the talks. This ideological approach to dealing with the "axis of evil" has ensured that core issues are not being dealt with effectively, but allows unilateral demands to be made to Pyongyang without tainting the purity of Bush's faith-based diplomacy.

Bush diplomacy has not been based on reality. Neo-conservatives in the administration have held an abiding conviction that regime change was the preferred way to deal with evil. They believed that ultimately Kim Jong Il would behave so egregiously that even the Chinese and South Koreans would join in sanctions to bring down the Kim Jong Il regime. As we have seen, this has not been so, even after the rocketry provocations July the Fourth. While nuclear weapons tests in North Korea might shake Beijing's and Seoul's approach, by then the process will be so far beyond control that Pyongyang may decide that its nuclear arsenal and ballistic missiles will protect North Korea from America and intimidate the South Koreans and Chinese into continuing their economic support for a nuclear-armed North Korea.

A reliably informed Chinese recently told me that China is no longer in a hurry to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, but now believes that normalization of the DPRK through economic reform should occur first, after which, the nuclear issue can be managed. At the current pace, however, despite some movement on economic reform, this could take many years to achieve. Moreover, my

Chinese interlocutor added tellingly, neither Washington nor Pyongyang seems interested in a settlement.

During the six years of Bush's presidency, there has been only one glimmer of hope that the administration sought a rational resolution of the issues with the DPRK. In the spring of 2005, North Korean negotiator and State Department Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Chris Hill indicated that he had the support of Secretary of State Condolezza Rice and President Bush to negotiate with the North Koreans in the context of the Six-Party Talks an overall settlement with Pyongyang. Over the summer Ambassador Hill pursued this mandate with patience, flexibility, and innovation and achieved the remarkable agreed principles September 19, 2005, that envisaged verifiable de-nuclearizing North Korea in exchange for economic exchange, political normalization, and discussion of provision of a light water nuclear reactor to North Korea "at an appropriate time."

Just the day before this remarkable agreement had been concluded, the Treasury Department announced new sanctions against North Korea for counterfeiting and hard-liners in the Bush Administration and North Korea began issuing tough statements about the just-concluded negotiations. In other words, for $24 million salvaged from counterfeiting and reiteration of hard-line comments, Bush administration hard-liners managed to scuttle Ambassador Hill's September 19 achievement. Those same officials rejected an invitation to Hill to visit Pyongyang in the fall of 2005 to try to get the agreement back on track, vetoed a meeting with Hill sought by North Korea Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye Gwan in Tokyo in mid-April 2006 and another invitation for Hill to visit Pyongyang in June 2006 to try to rescue the tenuous hopes for solution produced September 19.

While the UN Security Council will presumably produce a watered-down resolution on North Korea's missile tests, it will not change the dynamic in Pyongyang and hardliners in Washington will ensure that measures are taken to punish Pyongyang's display of its incipient rocket power.

The core issue remains - conviction in Pyongyang of the undying hostility in Washington to the regime in North Korea. The DPRK has felt threatened by the United States since its founding. The American existential threat to the DPRK fueled the crises in 1994, in 1998, in 2002, and today. Pyongyang takes seriously the constant rumble of threats that characterize the Bush administration's approach to foreign policy. This is the reason that Pyongyang insists on talking directly with the United States. Japan, China, South Korea, and Moscow do not pose a threat to the DPRK. While direct talks of the core issue is essential, specifically that the United States end its hostility and threat to the DPRK, this can be accomplished in the context of the Six-Party Talks to assuage Bush's sensitivities about talking with evil.

Herein lays the crux. President Bush denies reality, apparently cannot bring himself to defy the hardliners in his own administration and to instruct his administration to resolve the crisis with Pyongyang. Moreover, despite the denials of crisis from the administration in the past few days, the emergence of a nuclear weapon state with inter-continental ballistic missile capability is a crisis of enormous proportions for America's national security, as well as for the national security of our allies in East Asia.

Moreover, the failure to resolve the nuclear threat is creating a profound and dangerous schism in Asia, dividing the United States and Japan from a continent including both Koreas increasingly dominated by China. Such a split, driven by the nuclear stand-off and fueled by the Japanese-American development of a missile defense system, risks American strategic pre-eminence in East Asia, established since World War II, including by costly wars in Korea and Vietnam.

The pattern is clear. Despite President Bush's tough talk vowing not to allow North Korea to have

nuclear weapons, Pyongyang has proceeded cavalierly to develop its nuclear weapons capability.

President Bush needs to recognize reality. His ideological approach to the "axis of evil" has only compounded the threats and been incompetent as well. In the case of North Korea, although the situation now seems hopeless, only a miracle, an epiphany in the White House, might rescue America's interests. Strategic wisdom and competent leadership are sorely needed in the presidency.

Rather than "staying the course," President Bush should move quickly past the UN resolution on the rockets, put the best face possible on these developments, rein in his hardliners, appoint a full-time, high-level, fully empowered Coordinator for the Korean Peninsula, and instruct the Coordinator and rest of the Bush government to work urgently, patiently, flexibly, and innovatively to achieve a comprehensive solution to the North Korean nuclear and missile issues. With such an approach, China, South Korea, and Russia might join the United States in pressuring Pyongyang to end its dangerous challenge and President Bush could perhaps partially redeem a legacy as the protector of U.S. interests.

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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