Policy Forum 98-13A: Future of the Agreed Framework: The Coming North Korean Crisis

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NAPSNet Forum #23 --Future of Agreed Framework

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Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network

FUTURE OF AGREED FRAMEWORK

#23A -- November 17, 1998

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THE COMING NORTH KOREAN CRISIS

Essay by Arnold Kanter

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I. Introduction

The following essay is the first in a series of essays on the current state of the US-DPRK Agreed Framework. It was written by Arnold Kanter, a Senior Fellow at the Forum for International Policy. Mr. Kanter served as US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs from 1991 to 1993 and Special Assistant to the President for Defense Policy and Arms Control on the National Security Council staff from 1989 to 1991.

Mr. Kanter discusses the failure of the 1994 Agreed Framework to accomplish its goals, and calls for a thorough reevaluation of US policy toward the DPRK. He argues that the US must forge a new approach to reduce the risk that the DPRK poses to peace, not only on the Korean peninsula, but to the region as a whole. This essay originally appeared as the Forum for International Policy Issue Brief #98-15 on November 6, 1998. It is being reprinted with permission.

II. Essay by Arnold Kanter

"The Coming North Korean Crisis: Back to the Future?"

In 1994, the United States and North Korea made a nuclear deal. Pyongyang agreed to freeze and eventually dismantle its existing nuclear program in exchange for an undertaking by Washington to build two light water nuclear power reactors and to supply fuel oil in the interim. The terms of this bargain were codified in the "Agreed Framework" which quickly became the virtual embodiment of the Clinton administration's policy toward North Korea. Both that deal and U.S. policy appear to be unraveling and another foreign policy crisis looms.

The Agreed Framework has been controversial from the beginning. However, recent developments - notably the North Korean flight test of its Taepo Dong ballistic missile and the discovery of possible underground nuclear facilities under construction - are raising new, serious doubts about it. In the

recently passed omnibus spending bill, Congress put the Clinton administration on notice that North Korea must address a range of security concerns beyond the nuclear reactor and reprocessing facilities at Yongbyon or the Agreed Framework is dead.

The roots of the Agreed Framework can be traced back to the early 1990s when U.S. policymakers concluded that North Korean efforts to develop a nuclear weapons capability were real, serious, and dangerous. Growing out of this conclusion was a conviction that, one way or another, something had to be done to respond to this threat. The "something" which resulted was the Agreed Framework deal between the United States and North Korea which was reached in Geneva in October, 1994.

With varying degrees of enthusiasm, Seoul and Tokyo not only signed on to the deal, but agreed to foot the lion's share of the $4-5 billion cost of implementing it. China likewise tacitly went along. But lurking behind this seeming international consensus were divergent views among the parties - rarely acknowledged, much less articulated - about both the premises and the purposes of the Agreed Framework.

To begin with, it never was clear that the Japanese, to say nothing of the Chinese, shared Washington's assessment of the nature and seriousness of North Korea's nuclear activities. Specifically, there were persistent doubts in Tokyo and Beijing that the implications of Pyongyang's actions were sufficiently clear and significant to warrant taking tough measures against North Korea if efforts to negotiate a deal failed. Against this backdrop, the sighs of relief in these capitals when the Agreed Framework was announced were due as much to a sense that an American overreaction had been averted as to a belief that imminently threatening North Korean activities had been halted.

More fundamentally, there never was a clear consensus - even in the United States - about the purposes and objectives of the Agreed Framework nor, therefore, about whether it was succeeding or failing. Supporters of the Agreed Framework not only saw it as an arrangement which would "freeze and reverse" the North Korean nuclear weapons program by stopping the reprocessing of plutonium into weapons-grade material, but also as a way to "reform" North Korea by breaking down its self-imposed isolation and reducing its collective paranoia. Even some who were skeptical that the Agreed Framework could accomplish these more ambitious objectives nevertheless saw it as a way to "buy time" pending what seemed to many to be the impending collapse of the Pyongyang regime. Still others were unalterably opposed to the deal, arguing that it was both futile to try to "buy" North Korean agreement to abandon its nuclear program and it was wrong to try.

In the immediate aftermath of the Agreed Framework deal, it was possible to paper over many of these differences. Events over the past four years, however, have challenged the varying premises on which support for (or at least acquiescence in) the Agreed Framework has been based, while reinforcing the skepticism and criticism of the deal's opponents.

First, it is becoming increasingly clear that North Korea is not on the brink of collapse, and that we will continue to have to deal with the Kim Jong-Il regime for the foreseeable future. In light of this assessment, the "buying time" rationale for the Agreed Framework no longer makes sense.

Second, four years after the Agreed Framework was signed, North Korea shows no meaningful signs of reforming internally or of behaving more responsibly internationally. The absence of any such changes argues that even if the Agreed Framework succeeds in getting North Korea to continue to freeze and eventually dismantle its declared nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, that accomplishment should not give us confidence that North Korea has abandoned its nuclear ambitions or will cease to be the major current threat to peace and security in the region.

The recent test firing of the Taepo Dong missile across Japan, and discovery of underground

facilities under construction, have brought these ambiguities and differences into sharp relief. The underground construction renews concerns about a clandestine North Korean nuclear weapons program and other efforts by Pyongyang to develop weapons of mass destruction. The Taepo Dong test - which revealed a much more advanced ballistic missile program than we had expected - demonstrated a major, long-term investment by this starving nation in the means by which to deliver such weapons.

If things continue on their present course, we could well be headed back to a new - if depressingly familiar - confrontation with North Korea and to square one in deciding how to address it. Under these circumstances, there is a clear need for a bottom-up re-examination of the Agreed Framework and its underlying premises, a job which Congress has directed be performed by a "North Korea Policy Coordinator" to be appointed by the President. Following are nine principles which might help structure such a review.

1. The Agreed Framework is a means, not an end, of policy. Notwithstanding the temptation to want to salvage what has been touted as a major foreign policy success, the bottom-up review should not be about "saving" that agreement. Indeed, it no longer is particularly interesting or useful to debate whether North Korea is "complying with" or "violating" the specific terms of the Agreed Framework. If, despite the Agreed Framework, North Korea poses a continuing and growing threat to U.S. interests, then the Agreed Framework either is inadequate or has failed. A better question is whether and how it can be revised to support those goals, or whether a different approach is more likely to be successful.

2. Like it or not, we now have a stake in the Agreed Framework; we are not starting with a clean sheet of paper. Not only can the North Koreans still credibly threaten to resume their nuclear activities at Yongbyon if we were to walk away from the Agreed Framework, but we would lose essential regional support if we bear the onus for its collapse. If the Agreed Framework is to be abandoned, responsibility for that outcome must be seen to rest squarely with Pyongyang. Until then, we should not renege on our obligations under it, much less refuse to pay our modest share of its implementation costs.

3. The ballistic missile issue is now tied with the nuclear issue for first priority. The recent Taepo Dong test puts Japan in range of North Korean nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, and could soon place Hawaii and Alaska in similar jeopardy. As such, it both reinforces concerns about Pyongyang's nuclear intentions and constitutes an urgent issue in its own right. For political and military reasons, the task of dealing with the emerging North Korean ballistic missile threat no longer can be relegated to a separate, slower track.

4. Cooperation with Japan on the development of theater missile defenses (TMD) is likely to become linked to the debate about North Korea policy. There will be growing pressure in Tokyo and Washington to accelerate and intensify TMD cooperation as a result of the Taepo Dong test. Concern about this prospect may lead the Chinese, who already are vocally critical of TMD cooperation, to work with us to put pressure on the North Koreans as a way to slow down or stop work on TMD. Perhaps more likely is that Beijing will try to use the prospect of its help in dealing with North Korea as leverage to get us (and/or the Japanese) to abandon TMD cooperation. We will need to have thought through how to deal with these various TMD linkages.

5. The U.S. should make every effort to engage the other key regional actors - South Korea, Japan, China - in whatever approach it adopts. A go-it-alone-strategy not only is less likely to succeed with North Korea, but also could do serious damage to bilateral relationships of central importance to U.S. interests. That said, we need to recognize that the other regional actors remain more skeptical than we about the North Korean threat, and less willing to contemplate pressuring Pyongyang.

Moreover, Japan - now galvanized by the Taepo Dong test - may pull us in one direction, while South Korea and China - which will not want to do anything to increase the risks of a North Korean collapse - are likely to pull us in another. What all need to understand is that critical U.S. interests are at stake, and that our determination to protect them will not be held hostage to a multilateral consensus.

6. China is the key to any multilateral effort. As its large-scale, unconditional food and oil assistance to Pyongyang indicates, Beijing will do whatever it believes is required to keep North Korea afloat. Any efforts to increase pressure on Pyongyang which do not include China are likely to founder on this reality. At the same time, China has no interest in a North Korea armed with nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Since we also do not want to see North Korea implode, our interests converge with those of Beijing in both respects. The challenge we face is to persuade Beijing that notwithstanding these shared interests (as well as our shared stake in the bilateral relationship), we will be forced to take actions which could jeopardize the survival of the Kim Jong-Il regime unless the PRC supports - or at least does not undercut - efforts to pressure Pyongyang on the nuclear and missile issues.

7. Recognize that any North Korean responsiveness on the nuclear, missile, and other issues will come at a price. As distasteful as the appearance of "paying blackmail" or rewarding bad behavior may be, we should not as a matter of principle refuse to consider an expanded deal which effectively addresses our nuclear, missile, and other concerns in exchange for responding to some of Pyongyang's demands. At the same time, we should not pay for the same horse yet again. We also should be careful to ensure that any steps we take are as reversible as those we would seek from Pyongyang. Thus, we should insist either on regular on-site inspections of suspect underground facilities (or high confidence that work on them has stopped) simply as a matter of Pyongyang resolving suspicions that it is not upholding its end of the Agreed Framework deal, but we might consider lifting some of the sanctions on private trade and investment in exchange for an end to missile flight tests.

8. We have no strong interest in economic reform in North Korea or in reducing its self-imposed isolation except insofar as these steps would contribute to our central policy objectives. These instead should be viewed as means to the ends of terminating and dismantling of the North Korean nuclear program, halting its missile proliferation, and ensuring that it is becoming less rather than more of a threat to stability on the Korean peninsula and in the region more generally.

9. Prepare for the failure of efforts to forge a new approach which builds on the Agreed Framework. A non-coercive strategy which enlists the active support of the other key regional actors in effectively addressing our concerns is clearly preferable to a unilateral, coercive strategy. It is, however, an effort which is more likely to fail than to succeed. We can both improve the prospects for success, and be in a better position if our diplomacy falls short, if we credibly demonstrate that we are determined, if necessary, to carry out a unilateral strategy aimed at coercing North Korea.

In many ways, the clock has been turned back to 1994, to the period immediately preceding the Agreed Framework. Once again, the security situation on the Korean peninsula is becoming increasingly dangerous. Once again, U.S. policy toward North Korea stands at a crossroads: we either can try to develop a strategy which builds on the Agreed Framework or abandon it in favor of a different - and perhaps much tougher - approach. Once again, the success of our strategy will depend critically not only on decisions taken in Washington and Pyongyang, but also on how - and how well - Americans, South Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese can work together to forge a common approach. What we cannot afford to do is to let things drift in the hope that history will somehow do our work for us. The stakes, at home and abroad, are far too high to permit a business-as-usual approach.

III. 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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