

Policy Forum 01-02C: Six Myths About Dealing With Pyongyang

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Six Myths About Dealing With Pyongyang

By Leon V. Sigal

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I. Introduction

This essay is by Leon V. Sigal, Director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council and author of "Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea." This is the third in a series on the future of US relations with Northeast Asian countries under the administration of incoming US President George W. Bush.

Sigal argues that the proposed US missile defense system is too far off to protect the United States from a possible DPRK missile attack, and, therefore, it is in the US interest to conclude a deal to terminate the DPRK's missile program. Sigal outlines six myths, which he argues have prevented the conclusion of such a missile deal.

II. Essay by Leon V. Sigal

"Six Myths About Dealing With Pyongyang"

By Leon V. Sigal

A deal to shut down North Korea's missile program would greatly benefit U.S. security because it will take at least six years to deploy any defenses to protect against the launch of a North Korea missile while a verifiable end to Pyongyang's missile threat can be concluded in just months. Critics who decry such a deal are perpetuating six myths that have impeded negotiations with Pyongyang.

Myth one is that Washington is yielding to blackmail in dealing with Pyongyang. North Korea's threats have been widely misconstrued. For the past decade, Pyongyang has been playing tit-for-tat, not blackmail. It has cooperated when Washington cooperated and retaliated when Washington reneged. Experience taught the previous administration what the critics have yet to learn -- that reciprocity works in bargaining with Pyongyang.

Myth two is that the United States is giving North Korea what it wants without getting anything in return. In fact, the October 1994 Agreed Framework shut down North Korean nuclear plants that could have generated enough plutonium to make at least 60 nuclear warheads by now. In talks last October with Secretary of State Albright in Pyongyang, North Korea's Kim Jong Il offered not only to halt all missile exports, but also to freeze all testing, production, and deployment of his No-Dong and Taepo-Dong missiles and eventually eliminate them. He has also expressed readiness for talks to reduce his artillery, tanks, and troops. Those talks can defuse the armed standoff in Korea that nearly led to war in June 1994. Pyongyang wants to put its troops to more productive use in the civilian economy, but can do so only if Seoul and Washington reciprocate. Talks cannot begin in earnest until the allies work out a common negotiating position.

Myth three is that Pyongyang's aim in these talks is to get all U.S. troops out of Korea. Yet Pyongyang has been telling Washington since 1992 that so long as the United States remains its enemy, U.S. troops are a threat and must go, but once the relationship is no longer hostile, U.S. troops in Korea could remain in a new role, that of peacekeepers, while still allied with the South. That would provide a rationale for continued U.S. presence, now that deterrence against the threat of invasion is no longer as politically compelling to many South Koreans.

Myth four is that Pyongyang's emergence from self-imposed isolation this year was sudden change of heart -- a death-bed conversion. In fact, North Korea has tried to reach out to the United States, South Korea, and Japan since the late 1980s -- well before its economic decline and famine -- in hopes of ending its lifelong enmity with all three. Suspicious of Pyongyang's intent and determined to keep it isolated in hopes of compelling it to stop nuclear-arming, Washington initially impeded Seoul and Tokyo from improving ties. It also discouraged Israel, Italy, and others from normalizing diplomatic relations.

Myth five is that until Pyongyang reforms its economy, aiding it would be wasteful. Yet aid is the price for achieving U.S. security goals and a tool for changing North Korea. Sure, the North's economy is so depressed that any aid or investment would help it revive, reform or no reform, but outside assistance will also bring potential agents of change into North Korea, so long as they play by its rules. Washington will get nowhere by insisting that Pyongyang first open up or pass Econ 101.

Myth six is that Pyongyang is desperately trying to extort money to forestall economic collapse. In return for giving up missile exports, tests, production, and deployment, Pyongyang does seek compensation in the form of aid and investment from the outside, including having another country launch its satellites. Its primary concern, however, is its security. It sees an end to enmity with

Washington as the only way to ensure that. That is why it wanted President Clinton to come to Pyongyang and why President Bush should go when a missile deal is ready for signing

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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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