



Policy Forum 03-11A: Charging The Nuclear Red Line



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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 03-11A: Charging The Nuclear Red Line", NAPSNet Policy Forum, February 10, 2003, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/nautilus-institute-policy-forum-online-charging-the-nuclear-red-line/>

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PFO 03-11A: February 10, 2003

Charging The Nuclear Red Line

By Peter Hayes

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I. Introduction

Peter Hayes, Executive Director of the Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, argues that

unless the Bush administration initiates talks directly with North Korea immediately, the United States will end up with a nuclear-armed North Korea, no military option to exercise, and a ruptured alliance with South Korea who will go-it-alone.

II. Essay by Peter Hayes

"Charging The Nuclear Red Line"

By Peter Hayes
Executive Director, Nautilus Institute

The United States is adrift in the North Pacific. It's heading straight for a jagged reef--North Korea. The captain is asleep at the wheel. His senior officers on the bridge are squabbling about what to do.

Meanwhile, North Korea is charging across a nuclear red line. After throwing out the international inspectors, it has now fired up its puny research reactor to make more plutonium. It may also be reprocessing spent fuel to get more plutonium for bombs. And, it has a uranium enrichment program- a second track to acquiring nuclear weapons capability.

The longer these plants operate, the greater the radiological damage from an American surgical strike. And the harder it will be to ever determine how much plutonium was made and so far, not declared-the source of the initial confrontation ten years ago.

Is the United States about to head the North Koreans off at the pass? It's no secret that the Bush Administration is divided over how to handle North Korea. The hardliners in operational control believe that they have North Korea exactly where they want it--isolated and under tremendous internal and external pressure.

Time, they believe, is on the United States' side. Either North Korea will collapse under this pressure thereby transforming the regime. Or, North Korea will capitulate to American demands that they simply dismantle their nuclear weapons program and allow the International Atomic Energy Agency to inspect wherever, whenever and whatever in the world's most closed, secretive and subterranean society.

Because the hardliners believe that North Korea will never trade in its nuclear weapons capacity, not even for an economy, what they really mean is this: after we force Iraq to comply with its disarmament obligations, we'll focus fully on North Korea to burn another hole in the map. They have outmaneuvered and outgunned the pragmatists in Washington who want to negotiate with North Korea.

Thus, the world watches a high stakes waiting game to see who will blink first. North Korea demands that the United States commit to not attacking them, not impede their development with sanctions, and not overthrow their government.

The Administration states that it will talk directly with the North Koreans, but not until they have verifiably dismantled their nuclear program. Meanwhile, there's no sign of direct talks before the North acquires more fissile material.

If they don't act immediately, the United States will end up with a nuclear-armed North Korea, no military option to exercise, and a ruptured alliance with South Korea that will go-it-alone. The Democrats and allies will attack the Republicans for letting the North Koreans do an end run to

nuclear weapons status. The great powers in the region will draw their own conclusion.

Ironically, unlike Saddam Hussein, this would be second prize for the North Koreans.

In my view, they would prefer first prize-to trade in their nuclear weapons for a security relationship with the United States. This could include handing over their rolodex of terrorist contacts and joining the war on terrorism. Apparently, the United States prefers no for an answer.

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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