

Policy Forum 03-42A: Diplomatic Fantasyland: The Illusion of a Negotiated Solution to the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

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Diplomatic Fantasyland: The Illusion of a Negotiated Solution to the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

by Nicholas Eberstadt

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I. Introduction

Nichoas Eberstadt, Henry Wendt Chair in Political Economy at the American Enterprise Institute, argues that a negotiated settlement to the North Korean nuclear drama would be the most desirable outcome for all of the DPRK's neighbors. However, a diplomatic settlement resulting in a permanent and irreversible denuclearization is an exceedingly unlikely prospect. Eberstadt identifies three major obstacles to a peaceful diplomatic solution: Pyongyang's own nuclear intentions, the international precedents for other would-be proliferators that would be established by any deal that rewarded the DPRK, and Pyongyang's credibility as a negotiation partner.

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II. Essay by Nicholas Eberstadt

"Diplomatic Fantasyland: The Illusion of a Negotiated Solution to the North Korean Nuclear Crisis"
By Nicholas Eberstadt, American Enterprise Institute

Prior to the "six party talks" in Beijing, anticipation seemed to be running high that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea might agree to conclude its nuclear konfrontasi through peaceful international negotiations. The United States and North Korea's neighbors (China, Russia, Japan and South Korea) had hoped to convince Pyongyang's leadership to accept some diplomatic deal for dismantling of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program.

Even President Bush, no fan of the Kim Jong Il regime, had expressed "optimism" that the still-mounting North Korean nuclear crisis could be resolved through diplomatic means. Such sentiments seemed to be widely shared-but unfortunately, they amounted to little more than diplomatic wishful thinking. And now, North Korea remains entirely unlikely to be talked out of its nuclear weapons program.

It's easy, course, to see why the international community should desire a negotiated settlement to the crisis: from its own standpoint, a sealed agreement for a deliberate, comprehensive and permanent end to the DPRK's nuclear weapons program looks like the best of all possible worlds. (The dark alternatives to diplomatic breakthrough, remember, are a North Korean nuclear breakout, or an incalculably risky campaign of force to compel Kim Jong Il to give up his nukes.)

But the North Korean nuclear crisis happens to be one of those sorry international disputes in which the most desirable outcome is also the least likely-a category all too familiar in modern history. Indeed: the practical obstacles to securing an irreversible and verifiable end to Pyongyang's nuclear program through diplomatic negotiations alone are not just formidable. They are so overwhelming as

to beggar belief.

Consider the first obstacle to an agreed settlement: the nuclear objectives of the Pyongyang regime. Diplomatic sophisticates-especially those favoring a possible "grand bargain" with the DPRK over nukes, aid and security-have opined that the six-party talks will be an opportune venue in which to probe North Korea's "nuclear intentions". But the probing of North Korean nuclear intentions is not exactly uncharted diplomatic terrain, as even the briefest review of the record should remind.

In the early 1990s, after all, South Korea's President Roh Tae Woo probed those intentions through his Nordpolitik, and after two years of intensive diplomacy managed to hammer out the 1992 "North-South Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula". Soon it was clear Pyongyang was cheating on that agreement-at which juncture the United States probed North Korea's nuclear intentions through a foray of diplomacy capped by the 1994 Washington-Pyongyang "Agreed Framework". When that "Framework" first began to wobble back in 1998-under suspicion of renewed North Korean nuclear cheating-the Clinton Administration resolved to robe North Korea's nuclear intentions once again: this time through the "Perry Process", designed by former Defense Secretary William J. Perry. And for five steady years, from early 1998 to early 2003, President and Nobel Peace Laureate Kim Dae Jung probed North Korea's nuclear intentions through his diplomacy-intensive "Sunshine Policy". During his final months in office, Pyongyang was caught once again cheating on its nuclear deals. Instead of scrapping the offending program, North Korea admitted the violation, declared the Agreed Framework dead, and pushed its nuclear weapons program into overdrive.

Should we believe that a deep mystery about North Korea's true nuclear intentions lies buried within this storyline, unearthed as yet by diplomatic exploration? The record actually suggests we already know North Korea's nuclear intentions fairly well. Pyongyang pushes its nuclear weapons project overtly when it can-and covertly when it must. With the right enticements, furthermore, Pyongyang can be convinced to promise to give up its nuke program: it just can't be convinced to give up the program itself.

Even if one is willing to ignore the inconvenient issue of Pyongyang's nuclear intentions, a potential diplomatic deal for scrapping North Korea's nuke project would founder on a second set of shoals. These are the global precedents that such a bargain would establish. The US may be the world's sole superpower, but the DPRK is not the only would-be proliferator. In Tehran-to mention just one world capitol-the North Korean nuclear crisis is currently being carefully studied for lessons.

Thus far, North Korea has violated international nonproliferation strictures more flagrantly, and more provocatively, than any contemporary government. Thus far, apart from a "suspension" of free US oil shipments, North Korea has suffered absolutely no penalties for its nuclear transgressions. And earlier this very month, South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun pledged massive economic help to the DPRK once the nuclear crisis is resolved.

If Pyongyang should secure a negotiated settlement in which it avoids punishment for its past violations-or earns new rewards for promising to redress them-exactly how will we persuade hostile and revisionist mullahs or sheiks that they, too, should not be racing for the nuclear finish line?

There is a third and hardly incidental complication in "getting to yes" with North Korea-just whom are we supposed to shake hands with? To put the matter bluntly: there are no credible bargaining partners in the current DPRK regime.

Last October in Pyongyang, one Kang Sok Ju of the DPRK Foreign Ministry informed US officials that his country had been conducting a secret nuclear program despite the Agreed Framework with

Washington. This was the very same Mr. Kang, however, who negotiated and signed the Agreed Framework for the North Korean side in the first place! Obviously his word cannot be trusted in any future nuclear negotiations-but who can we trust from the North Korean side in his stead? Perhaps his boss, the "Dear Leader"-who as Chairman of the DPRK's National Defense Commission runs North Korea's nuclear weapons program, and must have approved and funded these recurring nuclear violations and deceptions?

Without a trustworthy negotiating partner from Pyongyang, a new nuclear deal with North Korea is either worthless-unless, of course, it can be assured through reliable independent means of verification. For North Korea as it exists today, alas, a foolproof independent "verification regimen" would be barely distinguishable from outside military occupation.

Diplomatic atmospherics are among of the many scarce goods that Pyongyang presumes to regulate, and ration. But any genuine progress toward a diplomatic resolution of the nuclear impasse cannot be expected without fundamental- nay, revolutionary- changes in outlook and policy on the part of Pyongyang's leadership. None of the options Washington and her allies in North Korea face are pleasant-but the time has come to face them squarely, without diplomatic illusion.

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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