

Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online: Discussion of “The Road from Berlin”



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Discussion of "The Road from Berlin"

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September 21, 1999

I. Introduction

The following are comments on Nicholas Eberstadt's Essay, "The Road From Berlin," which appeared as Nautilus Policy Forum Online 9907B on September 21. This report includes comments by Haksoon Paik of the Sejong Institute, Peter Moody of the University of Notre Dame, and Won-Ki Choi of the Joongang Daily News.

II. Comments on Nicholas Eberstadt's Essay

1. Comments by Haksoon Paik

The following comments are by Haksoon Paik of the Sejong Institute in the ROK.

I basically agree with Nicholas Eberstadt when he says that "the euphoria already evident in some quarters about the results of the Berlin talks is--to say the least--somewhat premature." But I have serious disagreements on many of his points.

First, Eberstadt does not see any good reason for North Korea to find attractive the deals and paths envisioned by the Perry proposal. As was alluded to in my response to Victor Cha's essay, I think North Korea has a very good reason to regard the Perry proposal as very attractive. The North Korean government has already welcomed the U.S's easing of economic sanctions via Korean Central News Agency announcement, and the North Korean foreign ministry officially announced suspension of the testfiring of North Korean long-range missiles for the duration of the negotiation with the U.S.

As far as I understand, the North Korean leadership clearly understands that the North Korean crisis is an economic crisis, not a security crisis. Kim Jong Il opened his own era from October 1997 after spending four years cultivating the military and strengthening his power base in the party since his father's death. The food situation in North Korea has ameliorated somewhat this year due to food assistance coming from abroad. We know a partial food rationing began from June this year even in the remote northern provinces in North Korea. This will, more or less, help relieve the North Korean people of the discontentment about the Kim Jong Il regime to some extent. Kim Jong Il is sure to prefer keeping this momentum going by providing more food for his people and promising economic recovery in the coming years.

Second, I am afraid Eberstadt does not consider concurrent and ensuing effects of the lifting of trade embargo against North Korea by the U.S. The U.S's lifting of economic sanctions against North Korea will signal and endorse other potential investors around the world--including U.S. firms abroad and South Korean firms--to go into North Korea.

I agree with Eberstadt's interpretation that North Korea will regard the changes that the new international trade practices will bring in as "threats to the very survival of its system." But what the North Korea official media say about this subject should not be accepted at face value. It is noteworthy that North Korea introduced an external economic arbitration law this past August and that North Korea altered nine laws related to foreign business early this year in order to make adjustments in connection with the revised Constitution of North Korea for more room for non-socialist economic activities. It should be pointed out that North Korea is more than eager to expand and strengthen economic cooperation with the West. Yes, North Korea is resolved to bloc any capitalist influence coming from outside, but this does not necessarily mean that North Korea is not preparing for new economic and other opportunities with the West.

Here, let me point out the need to read between the lines when we deal with North Korea's official announcements, statements, and newspaper articles. North Korea's advocacy of a "powerful and prosperous state" is an example. People tend to be embarrassed by this "strong" slogan. The slogan is designed to soothe the starving people after enduring several years of "arduous march" without much fruitful outcome. The powerful and prosperous state is, namely, a state that is powerful and prosperous in the four areas--the politics, ideology, military, and economy. North Korea media maintain that the goal has already achieved in the first three areas, only leaving unfulfilled the goal of becoming an "economically" powerful and prosperous state. This means that North Korea is very much ready for concentrating on economic recovery and prosperity.

Yes, the North Korean system is currently run on the "military-first policy" simply because it has no other option but to rely on the military to sustain the system. Any authoritarian state in such a distress may resort to the military and police force if the system or the power of the ruling group itself is in danger. As I argued previously in the Nautilus Institute's NAPSNet Policy Forum Online ([PFO 99-06](#)), the dilemma for the North Korean leadership is that it does not have any magic wand with which to strike a breakthrough in the present economic predicament, North Korea's economic failure being the result of the long-practiced socialist economic principles and self-reliance. What is clear at least is that the North Korean leadership is struggling for a magic combination of keeping the North Korean system more or less intact with a dramatic economic improvement.

Third, it is true, as Eberstadt pointed out, that the acquisition and perfection of weapons of mass destruction is "not" a "problem" to be solved for North Korea. In fact, it is a serious "problem" for South Korea, Japan, and the United States, but again not a problem for North Korea itself. Is the acquisition and perfection of weapons of mass destruction itself in North Korea's vital national interest, as Eberstadt argues? I am afraid not. The acquisition and perfection of weapons of mass destruction is not an end itself, it is a means to something. In other words, North Korea's nuclear program and long-range missiles are simply two of the most important means to securing vital national interests for North Korea--that is, the survival of the North Korean system, among other things.

Fourth, Eberstadt regards South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's comment that "another missile launch would not mean 'the end of the earth'" as "betray[ing] a stunning indifference to the security of his Japanese and American partners, whose populations the Taepo Dong II is being constructed specifically to imperil." When Eberstadt criticizes President Kim's comment, I am afraid he is sort of exaggerating the "hypothetical" damages that North Korea's long-range missiles may inflict on Japan and the United States. When does a country fire missiles at enemy countries? It will when it goes to war. If a war breaks out in Korea, who suffer most from the North Korean missiles? They are Koreans, not Japanese and Americans. We South Koreans are very well aware of this, and are working very, very hard to prevent another war in Korea. What President Kim Dae-jung meant was not the stunning indifference to the lives of the allies, but the demonstration of his firm resolve to

keep the momentum--which we had obtained since this past March when the U.S. and North Korea agreed on the inspection of the underground site at Kumchang-ni--going in order to find a solution to the North Korean nuclear and missile problems.

What the South Korean government intends to do is to dismantle the Cold War structure that still exist on the Korean Peninsula, which is the very source of crisis and instability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. So President Kim's comment should rather be interpreted to mean that he is conducting his engagement policy toward North Korea with a vision or a long-term goal of dislocating the Cold War structure on the Korean Peninsula and of establishing a more permanent peace and stability in Northeast Asia.

No wonder Americans, Japanese, and South Koreans have some reservation about North Korea's intention in the Berlin agreement. But the Zeitgeist for the 21st century will and should be reconciliation between and tolerance for differing ideologies, systems, and peoples, leaving the Cold War structure dismantled behind. In this spirit, I think what we need to worry more is how to be sincere enough in reaching a final agreement concerning the scrapping of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction, than being afraid North Korea possibly breaking its end of international agreements.

2. Comments by Peter Moody

These comments were contributed by Peter R. Moody, Jr. Professor, Government and International Studies, University of Notre Dame.

Nicholas Eberstadt's dissection of the weaknesses of the Berlin Agreement and the supposed recommendations of the Perry report is persuasive, particularly if, as some reports indicate, some "grand deal" has been reached at Berlin, with the DPRK agreeing to adopt less provocative behavior in return for concessions from the United States. But the implication I find in his analysis, that a more intransigent stance by the United States and its allies is in order, is also problematic, for its own dangers, its sterility, and its contravention of the ostensible South Korean policy.

The flaw in the American policy, here and throughout much of the past decade, may be in offering a quid pro quo for minimally respectable behavior in the first place. But if yielding to blackmail is an unacceptable policy, so is the making and carrying out of military threats; and there is little more in the way of economic sanctions that the United States can impose. Would it make sense, instead, unilaterally to end most economic sanctions and offer diplomatic recognition to the DPRK, in return for--nothing?

Weapons, nuclear or otherwise, may be problems in themselves, but are also responses to problems perceived by those who have them. It is also perhaps a reasonable assumption that North Korea has no abstract interest or desire to launch any kind of attack, nuclear or otherwise, against the United States or Japan now or in the future--that is, to attack either country simply for the pleasure it would accord the North Korean rulers.

To oversimplify, perhaps, but not to distort, America and North Korea are enemies because America is committed to defending South Korea against military conquest by North Korea. Eberstadt notes DPRK skill at exploiting differences among its adversaries, and one theme of North Korean foreign policy has been to try to appeal to the United States over the heads of the South Koreans--a strategy not absolutely successful, although the 1994 Agreed Framework would seem to be something of a triumph along these lines.

At this point, however, South Korea ("the architects of the ROK's 'sunshine' engagement policy") is taking a softer line than the United States. Since the root of the issue is a Korean quarrel, there may be little reason now in trying to outshout the pope, to be in effect more worried over the risks to South Korea than the South Korean government itself.

The offering of recognition is not a political settlement, but, at best, the beginning of one. It would resolve nothing, but might establish a basis for progress toward some sort of resolution. A likely North Korean reaction might well be to sniff scornfully at the offer, condescendingly suggesting that this is no doubt a little helpful but something to be discussed only after the withdrawal of US troops.

If the American offer is made unconditionally, neither should the United States contemplate any conditions imposed by North Korea, and any agreement with the DPRK should not come at the expense of obligations, especially military obligations, to the south. An American offer would at least open the door, and a willingness to be conciliatory might strengthen the hand in North Korea of those (surely there must be some) those susceptible to the "honey-coated poison" of reform and opening, who would want to see the ultimate fate of the division of Korea to be other than catastrophe--catastrophe certainly for the north, possibly for the south as well.

Regular routine contacts will (or should) allow procedures for discussion of issues now handled on an ad hoc basis--proliferation, also the famine. Ideally, of course, the American demarche should come in "concert" with the more relevant regional neighbors--China, Russia, Japan, South Korea. The ending of sanctions and the according of respect (for whatever that may be worth) implied in a normal political relationship would (potentially) end the ability of the North to exploit differences among adversaries.

Normalizing relations with the DPRK might be criticized for rewarding bad behavior, but that is what current American policy does, on a non-systematic, seemingly poorly thought-through basis. Under conditions of normal international intercourse, "rewards" would be the everyday, mundane condition, and could, if necessary, be withdrawn appropriately and in due measure in the face of bad behavior, rather than extended in return for not carrying out egregious threats of misbehavior. There may be risks in normalization, but the prevalent American policy has been sterile and, assuming that North Korea may easily overreach and there are limits to American appeasement, over the long run gut-wrenchingly risky.

3. Comments by Won-Ki Choi

The following comments are by Won-Ki Choi a journalist and researcher of the Joong-ang Daily, the leading newspaper of South Korea.

Mr. Eberstadt argues that the recent North Korea-US agreement is unlikely to lead to an opening of relations and an end of the North Korean missile program. The essay is a very interesting and academic one; however, his argument is wrong in five areas as follows.

One, Mr. Eberstadt argues that the recent North Korea-US deal is not an attractive one to the Pyongyang regime. This is not true. In pure commercial terms, probably this deal is not that attractive one; however, in political terms, it is a "shinning triumph" for the Pyongyang regime. Pyongyang has insisted on a direct deal with the US consistently for the last fifty years, and finally Washington has accepted it. Furthermore, Pyongyang got a present--lifting economic sanctions--from Washington by threatening the US with its missile. Thus the Berlin talks have a very significant and attractive meaning to Pyongyang.

Two, Mr. Eberstadt argues that the economic prospects for North Korea-US is gloomy one. Yes, but what about North Korea-Japan? Mr. Eberstadt, in my view, overlooks the genuine intention of Pyongyang's strategy. The strategists in Pyongyang have a twofold plan: 1) political gain from Washington with the missile threat; then, 2) gain economic benefits from Tokyo. Pyongyang has a fifty-four year-old right of claim to Tokyo over colonization between 1910-1945. Once it makes a political breakthrough at the Berlin talks with Washington, Pyongyang will resume the North Korea-Japan talks to gain hard currency. You will find Pyongyang's brilliant maneuvering toward Tokyo soon.

Three, Mr. Eberstadt argues that Pyongyang is unlikely to embrace the changes because it regards such changes as threats to the very survival of its system. I would like to point out that Pyongyang already embraced many changes since the early 1990s. For example, around one hundred international relief agency personnel are working in Pyongyang and local areas in the DPRK; the North Korean regime adopted a new incentive system in the agricultural sector; North Korea adopted many new laws to induce foreign investment, etc.

Four, Mr. Eberstadt argues that North Korea will not change its system, citing some North Korean propaganda; e.g., "We must heighten vigilance against the imperialists." However, Mr. Eberstadt missed more interesting "new propaganda," such as, "The US is not our one hundred enemy anymore." "The quality (of products) is the most important issue."

Five, Mr. Eberstadt argues that North Korea shall not give up its vital interests such as nuclear weapons and missiles. However, the records show that Pyongyang was and is willing to negotiate its vital national interests for the right quid pro quo. For example, Pyongyang proposed to Israel that it would stop its missile exports to the Middle East if Tel Aviv paid a good price. Pyongyang sold its vital interests--its nuclear program--to Washington for two US\$4 billion-worth Light Water Reactors in 1994. Also, Pyongyang allowed inspections for an underground tunnel to the US in compensation for grain in 1998.

The essay contains very interesting points; however it overlooks Pyongyang's strategies. Also, it seems to me that Mr. Eberstadt sees the North Korea that he wants to see. Please, try observing North Korea with a more broad and balanced view.

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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