Policy Forum 02-13A: Get the Message Right at APEC – North Korea’s Last Gambit

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by Victor Cha

CONTENTS

I. Introduction

II. Essay by Victor Cha

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

I. Introduction

The essay below, by Professor Victor D. Cha, Director of the American Alliances in Asia Project at Georgetown University, argues that President Bush's meetings with Asian leaders at the APEC summit in Mexico this weekend provide the opportune moment to get the message right with regard to North Korea's surprise admission of a secret nuclear weapons program. Over the past week, a debate has raged inside the US government and among outside experts about how to respond. Many moderates have argued that this new nuclear revelation is North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il's perverse but typical way of creating crisis to pull a reluctant Bush administration into serious dialogue. Before the world accepts the North's confession as a cry for help, Bush must convince his counterparts at Los Labos to see Pyongyang's actions for what they are -- a serious violation of a standing agreement that will in effect be North Korea's last gambit at peaceful engagement with the United States and its allies.

II. Essay by Victor Cha

"Get the Message Right at APEC - North Korea's Last Gambit"
By Victor D. Cha

President Bush's meetings with Asian leaders at the APEC summit in Mexico this weekend provide the opportune moment to get the message right with regard to North Korea's surprise admission of a secret nuclear weapons program. Over the past week, a debate has raged inside the US government and among outside experts about how to respond. Many moderates have argued that this new nuclear revelation is North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il's perverse but typical way of creating crisis to pull a reluctant Bush administration into serious dialogue.

Before the world accepts the North's confession as a cry for help, Bush must convince his counterparts at APEC to see Pyongyang's actions for what they are -- a serious violation of a standing agreement that will in effect be North Korea's last gambit at peaceful engagement with the United States and its allies.

North Korea's actions constitute a blatant breakout from the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework designed to ensure denuclearization of the North. Those who try to make a technical, legalistic argument to the contrary are patently wrong. Though the Agreed Framework dealt specifically with the plutonium reprocessing facilities at Yongbyon, this document was cross-referenced with the 1991-1992 North-South denuclearization declaration, which banned either Korea from the uranium-enrichment facilities now found to be covertly held in the North.

Moreover, the implications of this act extend beyond a violation of US-DPRK bilateral confidences. Arguably all of the improvements in North-South relations including the June 2000 summit, breakthroughs in Japan-North Korea relations in 2001, and the wave of engagement with the reclusive regime that spread across Europe in 2000-2001 were made possible by what was perceived to be the North's good faith intentions to comply with a major nonproliferation commitment with the United States in 1994. The subsequent diplomatic advances would not have been possible without the Agreed Framework. And now the North has shown it all to be a lie. Though US diplomats have been careful not to declare the Framework dead, the likelihood that Congress would appropriate funds for its implementation are nil at this point. Suspension of the Framework is the de facto result for now.

If Pyongyang seeks to turn lemons into lemonade by leveraging its violation as a bargaining chip, then it is sorely mistaken. Bush and his counterparts at APEC must show that there will be little

support in the world community to "pay" for an investigation and rescinding of the activities in question. The United States did this once with regard to a suspected underground nuclear site in 1998-1999; Bush hawks, who are now only more skeptical of the North's intentions, will not engage in such attempted extortion again.

In spite of the North's serial bad behavior, we are not yet at a crisis on the Korean peninsula. Such an outcome awaits one more round of diplomacy in which the United States and its allies in Asia and Europe must impress upon Pyongyang in the strongest terms its need to allow international inspections and dismantlement of the uranium-enrichment facilities in question. If the North agrees to this, then a reinstatement and accelerated implementation of the Agreed Framework (with the appropriate inducements for Pyongyang to do so) might be in order. The most credible voices in this regard are Japan, as Koizumi must communicate to his recent host in Pyongyang that any hope of normalization and a large Japanese aid package remains otherwise distant; and China, whose interests in a non-nuclear Korean peninsula are arguably more intense than those of Washington. A nuclear North Korea could potentially mean a nuclear Japan, which is Beijing's worst nightmare (no wonder they applauded the Agreed Framework).

Despite Kim Jong-Il's genuine desire for economic reform and peaceful integration into the world community, apologists argue, the isolated and decrepit state of his country forces him to leverage security threats in case the intentions of those engaging North Korea are not benign. Since the Agreed Framework, however, we have been witness to eight years of engagement by South Korea, Japan, the European Union, and the United States. The message from these suitors has been clear: trade the WMD threat for economic reform and peaceful integration. Up until now, the burden of proof was on the United States and its allies vis a vis this small and paranoid regime. Now the leaders at APEC must agree that the cooperation ball is in Kim Jong-Il's court. Kim had better pick it up promptly and without ambiguity, or face complete isolation and neglect from the rest of the world.

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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Return to top
back to top

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