Policy Forum 01-02I: Korean Peninsula: Are There Things More Important, than Peace?

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Korean Peninsula: Are There Things More Important, than Peace?

By Georgi Toloraya

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I. Introduction

This essay is by Georgi Toloraya, Deputy Director-General of the 1st Asian Department in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Leading Research Fellow at the IMEMO of Russian Academy of Science. This is the eighth in a series on the future of US relations with Northeast Asian countries under the administration of incoming US President George W. Bush.

Toloraya argues that a number of developments over the past year have given watchers of North Korea the hope that North Korea is becoming just another developing, if not democratic, country, looking for its place in a new world order. Toloraya argues outsiders should abandon the hope of changing North Korea by forcing it to democratize, as otherwise engagement becomes a threat to the North Korean regime.

II. Essay by Georgi Toloraya

Last year gave everybody involved in Korean affairs a slim hope that after so many years of hostilities and uncertainty a new modus vivendi could be worked out in Korean Peninsula. The main elements of a new structure would seemingly include:

1. Political reconciliation and limited economic cooperation between North and South, that would provide a base for a long-term peaceful coexistence of two Koreas;

2. Normalization of relations between North Korea and its main adversaries - US and Japan, that would give North Korea security guarantees and access to Western economic aid - not emergency one, but production-oriented.

3. Cautious economic reforms (but not real opening!) in North Korea resembling (but not copying) Chinese - Vietnamese way, proceeding on condition they do not undermine Kim Jong Il's power base and do not invite foreign interference.

4. All of the above having as a result a qualitatively new North Korea - not a "belligerent terrorist outlaw rogue state", but another developing if not so democratic, country, looking for its place in a new world order. Such a country could exist and develop for a prolonged period of time before it would become willing - and ready - to integrate on an equal basis with South Korea - with consent of all of its neighbours.

The one but crucial condition for such a development is, however, the need to completely abandon any plans to change North Korea from within, to introduce democracy in a missionary style. Such attempts would really be based on a wishful thinking, inability to grasp the nature of North Korea as a sort of cult-state, governed by ideology where the concepts which are acquired by a Western man with his mother's milk are completely alien. Leon V. Sigal names only but a few of the myths prevalent in Western (and also South Korean, which also has a westernized mentality) perception of North Korea. The gap is actually much wider than most of Western analysts think, and the testament to it is the fact that North Korea is regarded as an "unpredictable" country, which equals to being dangerous.

So, engagement is good as long as it does not threaten North Korean regime (or it would not be perceived as a threat), but helps North Korea get educated how the world is run. You can't hasten the advent of the spring by melting the snow, even if you use artificial sunshine. At the same time any attempts to pressure, to dictate and "get tough" would only lead to contrary results - militarization, rather than demilitarization, more threat to neighbors rather than less. This is not a "dove" approach - rather, this the only pragmatic, deideologized one. And we will have to support not "the Kim Jong Il's reform effort, as distateful as it mey be", as Dan Pinkston suggests, but Kim Jong Il's regime per se, to enable him to change his country, although such an idea may be a hard sell in the US.

North Korea should not be treated as stranger, A. Foster-Carter writes and this seems to be precisely the recipe for the new US administration. Only keeping up the Agreed Framework, continuing Washington-Pyongyang dialogue with the prospect of formal normalisation in view would make it possible for the USA to solve existing problems - and avoid a disaster in Korea. Or are there things more important, than peace? Many neighboring nations, including Russia would disagree.

The crossroads, as W. Taylor puts it, is right ahead of us.

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III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

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