

Policy Forum 03-38A: N. Korea: Fibs versus Facts



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N. Korea: Fibs versus Facts

by Leon V. Sigal

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I. Introduction

Leon V. Sigal, director of the Northeast Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council in New York, asserts that the Bush administration has been misleading in its portrayal of North Korea by spreading three "inexactitudes" concerning North Korea's nuclear intention, role in the Agreed Framework, and the possibility of its collapse. Moreover, a U.S. strategy of strangulation cannot be effective unless all of the North's neighbors are willing to join in. However, none are willing to, as they all realize that pressure without negotiations won't work with Pyongyang.

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II. Essay by Leon V. Sigal

"N. Korea: Fibs versus Facts"
by Leon V. Sigal

While its faith-based intelligence and downright deceptions about Iraq are now being exposed, the Bush administration has been just as misleading about North Korea. North Korea has grudgingly accepted multiparty talks. It had been balking - not, as administration officials suggest, because it was insisting on bilateral talks with the United States, but because Washington has shown no interest in negotiating.

In three-way talks in Beijing in April, North Korea made a proposal to freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear programs. Allies South Korea and Japan want the Bush administration to make a counterproposal, but it has not. Yet administration officials say they seek a "diplomatic solution."

Winston Churchill would have called that a "terminological inexactitude." That phrase was Mr. Churchill's way around a rule in parliament against accusing fellow MPs of lying. The Bush administration is propagating other inexactitudes on North Korea, all of them designed to keep talks from turning into negotiations and all of them at odds with the facts.

One is that North Korea is determined to nuclear arm, so negotiating is an exercise in futility. Yet Pyongyang has said repeatedly it will accept a verifiable end to both its plutonium and uranium programs and yield any weapons it has. It will not give them away for nothing, however. It wants a written pledge from the United States not to attack it, impede its economic development or attempt to overthrow its government.

It insists on dealing directly with the United States, whether or not China, South Korea, Japan and Russia are at the negotiating table, because none of them can give security assurances on behalf of the United States. For the past two years, it has been talking nonstop with South Korea and Japan to ensure that they provide aid and investment as part of any nuclear deal.

North Korea will let U.S. inspectors monitor its nuclear sites, but it won't submit to international inspections until Washington ends what Pyongyang calls its "hostile policy."

North Korea will keep reprocessing plutonium and generating more spent nuclear fuel in its Yongbyon reactor. It will also continue to build gas centrifuges to enrich uranium. It wants an agreement in principle committing America to satisfy its security and economic concerns before it will stop.

This is intended to underscore North Korea's basic stance that if the United States remains its foe, it feels threatened and will seek nuclear arms and missiles to counter that threat, but if the United States ends enmity, it says it will not.

Does North Korea mean what it says? There is no way of knowing for sure without putting an offer on the table that satisfies both sides' interests. History does suggest the North is willing to deal. Under the Agreed Framework of October 1994, it froze work at facilities that by now could have been generating at least 30 bombs' worth of plutonium a year. That is a real nuclear weapons program. Its enrichment effort, by contrast, won't be ready to produce much weapons-grade uranium until mid-decade at the earliest, according to U.S. intelligence.

A second inexactitude advanced by the administration is that the United States kept its word but North Korea cheated. As President Bush said March 6, "My predecessor, in a good-faith effort, entered into a framework agreement. The United States honored its side of the agreement; North Korea didn't. While we felt the agreement was in force, North Korea was enriching uranium."

His advisers misinformed him. The fact is, Washington got what it most wanted up front, but it did not live up to its end of the bargain. When Republicans captured control of Congress in elections just days after the Agreed Framework was signed, they denounced the deal as appeasement. Afraid of taking them on, the Clinton administration backpedaled on implementation. It did little easing of sanctions until 2000. Reactor construction was slow to get under way. Although we pledged to provide the two reactors "by a target date of 2003," we did not pour the concrete for the first foundation until August 2002. We did not always deliver heavy fuel oil on schedule. Above all, we did not live up to our promise, in Article II of the Agreed Framework, to "move toward full normalization of political and economic relations" - to end enmity and economic sanctions.

When Washington was slow to fulfill the terms of the accord, Pyongyang in 1997 threatened to break it. Its acquisition of technology to enrich uranium from Pakistan began soon thereafter. That was a pilot program, not the operational capability that the North moved to acquire in 2001 - after the Bush administration refused to negotiate and instead put it on a target list for nuclear attack.

A third inexactitude is that North Korea is on the verge of collapse and that an economic embargo and naval blockade will bring it down. But trying to compel North Korea will provoke it to nuclear arm a lot sooner than to collapse. A strategy of strangulation cannot be effective unless all of the North's neighbors are willing to join in. None is willing to. They know exactly what the Bush administration has yet to learn, that pressure without negotiations won't work with Pyongyang.

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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