Policy Forum 01-02F: North Korea: Avoid Another Crossroads

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North Korea: Avoid Another Crossroads

By William J. Taylor

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I. Introduction

This essay is by William J. Taylor, an adjunct professor with The Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. This is the sixth in a series on the future of US relations with Northeast Asian countries under the administration of incoming US President George W. Bush, and responds to the preceding essays by Leon V. Sigal and Daniel A. Pinkston.

Taylor argues that it would be a mistake for the Bush Administration to pursue a "get tough" approach toward North Korea, demanding greater, faster reciprocity from Pyongyang in return for the largesse bestowed in outside aid. Taylor states that North Korea has passed its crossroads, and chose the right direction when they held the North-South Summit in Pyongyang and then entered the ongoing process of N-S dialogue. Taylor argues that there are understandable reasons why North Korea is slow to respond, but the US needs to maintain a steady course with persistent, but gentle, diplomacy.

II. Essay by William J. Taylor

"North Korea: Avoid Another Crossroads"
By William J. Taylor, Jr.

The Bush Administration is being given deserved credit for following up campaign pledges with discernable action. The most recent case was the set of air strikes against Iraq. Thankfully, there were few campaign pledges concerning U.S. policy toward North Korea which could lead to precipitate "get tough" decisions. North Korea far exceeds Iraq's military capability to threaten American and allied interests and lives.

However, there is growing concern, especially in Seoul, that the Bush Administration may be preparing to build a major crossroads in U.S. policy toward the two Koreas, with a new "get tough" approach toward the North demanding greater, faster reciprocity from Pyongyang in return for the largesse bestowed in outside aid. This would be a big mistake, which South Korea's leadership is trying to explain to the Bush Administration through the recent spate of Washington visits by their foreign minister, director of national intelligence and the early March summit planned by President Kim, Dae-jung.

The point is that the main crossroads has already been passed by North Korea and they chose the right direction when they warmed up to South Korea's "Sunshine policy," held the North-South Summit in Pyongyang last June, then entered the ongoing process of N-S dialogue and rapid normalization of relations with nations around the world. The correct U.S. foreign policy construct now is not another crossroads where Pyongyang just might take the wrong direction by miscalculation or accident. Rather, the approach should be to remove obstacles from the road already chosen.

What is maddening, especially for conservatives in South Korea's opposition Grand National Party and conservatives in the U.S. Congress, is the slow progress of the North's leadership in entering into and executing balanced, verifiable political, military and economic agreements leading to peaceful coexistence. However, getting impatient and returning to the failed "carrots and sticks" diplomacy in play toward North Korea prior to the nuclear crisis of early 1994, or even a diplomatic tack of zealous reciprocity, would be improper and unsafe approaches for 2001 and the foreseeable future.

Albeit slow in producing results in crucial areas such as confidence building and arms control or North Korean human rights and economic reforms, Seoul's " Sunshine policy" supported by coordinated policies of "constructive engagement" in Washington and Tokyo have Pyongyang at least moving in desirable directions unthinkable only three years ago. Like what? A N-S Summit with a reciprocal on the horizon; exchanges of separated families; acceleration of South Korean and other foreign investments in the North; a U.S. secretary of state in Pyongyang and a North Korean vice-marshal in Washington; an agreement to re-connect a N-S railroad and main highway; a moratorium on North Korean long-range missile testing while U.S.-DPRK missile talks continue; acceleration of N-S cultural exchanges; DPRK cultural exchanges with the U.S.; proposals for American educators to teach in North Korea; rapid North Korean normalization of relations with nations all over the world: all these changes, considered cumulatively, constitute positive change in North Korea's behavior.

These changes also lessen tensions across the Demilitarized Zone where, for a half-decade, war could have started by accident or miscalculation at times of high tension. War? These days, the US-ROK Combined Forces Command supported by Japan would rapidly win a "Pyrrhic victory" in which hundreds of thousands of Americans and our South Korean and Japanese allies would become

casualties from North Korean long and medium range missiles, long range artillery and rockets armed with weapons of mass destruction.

Yes, North Korean reciprocity is painfully slow, but patient diplomacy should remain the name of the game, especially if one understands as I think I do basic reasons why the North Korean leadership is so slow. Consider:

- North Korea's political system is based fundamentally on the Juche philosophy, a home-grown version of Marxism-Leninism which, buttressed by decades of anti-imperialist government disinformation focused primarily on Japan, The United States and South Korea, makes most leaders in Pyongyang very suspicious of our diplomatic motives. Fundamental ideas die hard and slowly.

All the North Korean agreements and negotiations referred to above have put an enormous strain on the North Korean government bureaucracy. Unlike their counterparts in Tokyo and Seoul, they simply do not have many thousands of people educated at western universities in such areas as free-market business and economics, in western contract law, or in the technicalities of arms control negotiations. The DPRK bureaucracy just can't "handle the load" and it shows in terms of negotiating psychology as well as speed.
The South Korean Government understands all this fully. In private meetings I had in Seoul with President Kim last July, and in similar meetings in November with the Minister of Defense and Minister of Unification, there was agreement on these general reasons for the slow pace of Pyongyang's movement toward and execution of agreements, but consensus also on their personal contacts with their North Korean counterparts. Surprisingly, in general, their view was "I find him to be a reasonable man who is attuned to the issues we discussed; a person who could listen to different views, a man who could change his mind in discussion when presented new facts. I can do business with this man." The Bush Administration should "stay the course" with very minor modifications in our policy toward the two Koreas. "Reciprocity" yes, but softly and carefully in conversations among diplomats-not tough posturing with headlines in the news. Copyright (c) 2001 Nautilus of America/The Nautilus Institute 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. Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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