

Policy Forum 02-27A: North Korea Is No Iraq: Pyongyang's Negotiating Strategy



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By Leon V. Sigal

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by Leon V. Sigal](#)

[III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses](#)

I. Introduction

In this essay by Leon Sigal, Director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Research Council, argues that instead of trying to compel rightly reluctant allies to ratchet up the pressure on North Korea, President Bush needs to ask himself, Is the world's only superpower tough enough to sit down and negotiate in earnest with North Korea?

This essay originally appeared in the December 2002 issue of [Arms Control Today](#) and was reprinted with permission.

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II. Essay by Leon V. Sigal

North Korea Is No Iraq: Pyongyang's Negotiating Strategy

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The revelation that North Korea is buying equipment useful for enriching uranium has led many in Washington to conclude that North Korea, like Iraq, is again making nuclear weapons and that the appropriate response is to punish it for brazenly breaking its commitments. Both the assessment and the policy that flows from it are wrong.

North Korea is no Iraq. It wants to improve relations with the United States and says it is ready to give up its nuclear, missile, and other weapons programs in return.

Pyongyang's declared willingness to satisfy all U.S. security concerns is worth probing in direct talks. More coercive alternatives - economic sanctions and military force - are not viable without allied support. Yet the Bush administration, long aware of North Korea's ongoing nuclear and missile activities, has shown little interest in negotiating.

Recognizing that, both Japan and South Korea have refused to confront North Korea and instead have moved to engage it. Hard-line unilateralists in the Bush administration and Congress oppose such engagement. As they continue to get their way, they are putting the United States on a collision course with its allies, undermining political support for the alliance in South Korea and Japan and jeopardizing the U.S. troop presence in both countries.

The United States rightly wants to stop North Korea from acquiring nuclear arms; prevent it from developing, testing, deploying and selling any more ballistic missiles; get rid of its biological and chemical weapons; and assure that, whatever happens internally in North Korea, the artillery Pyongyang has emplaced within range of Seoul is never fired in anger.

To achieve its aims, Washington has to understand that Pyongyang is seeking an end to its hostile relationship with the United States. When Washington fails to reciprocate, Pyongyang retaliates by breaking its pledges in a desperate effort to get Washington to cooperate.

Tit-for-Tat to End Enmity

In the late 1980s, then-North Korean leader Kim Il Sung decided he had no better way to provide for his country's security than to end its lifelong enmity with the United States, South Korea, and Japan.

He reached out to all three, but in the early 1990s, the first Bush administration, determined to put a stop to Pyongyang's nuclear arming before easing its isolation, impeded closer South Korean and Japanese ties with the North. Concluding that Washington held the key to open doors to Seoul and Tokyo, Pyongyang engaged seriously with Seoul and Tokyo in the ensuing decade only when it was convinced Washington was cooperating.

Pyongyang also decided to trade in its nuclear arms program in return for an end to enmity. At the same time it kept its nuclear option open as leverage on Washington to live up to its end of the bargain - initially by delaying international inspections to determine how much plutonium it had reprocessed before 1992.

That trade became the basis of the October 1994 Agreed Framework, whereby the North agreed to freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear arms program in return for two new light-water reactors (LWRs) for generating nuclear power, an interim supply of heavy fuel oil, some relaxation of U.S. economic sanctions, and - above all to North Korea - gradual improvement of relations. The accord stopped a nuclear program that had already produced five or six bombs' worth of plutonium then lying in a cooling pond in Yongbyon and that by now would have been capable of reprocessing 30 bombs' worth of plutonium a year.

In halting Pyongyang's plutonium program, Washington got what it most wanted up front, but it did not live up to its end of the bargain. When Republicans won control of Congress in elections just a week later, unilateralists in the Republican Party denounced the deal as appeasement. Unwilling to challenge Congress, the Clinton administration shrank from implementation. Construction of the first replacement reactor was slow to begin -it was supposed to be ready by 2003 but is three years behind schedule - and the heavy fuel oil was not always delivered on time. Above all, Washington did little to improve political relations with Pyongyang.

When the United States was slow to fulfill the terms of the October 1994 accord, North Korea threatened to break it. In February 1997, Pyongyang began warning it would no longer be bound by the accord if Washington failed to uphold it. That played into growing suspicions in the U.S. intelligence community that an underground site at Kumchang-ni might be nuclear-related. In late April 1998, the North stopped canning the plutonium-laden spent fuel at Yongbyon and it threatened to reopen the reactor at Yongbyon for maintenance. Its decision to acquire equipment for enriching uranium probably dates back to this time.

Had North Korea wanted to break the 1994 accord, it could have resumed reprocessing. It did not. Instead, Pyongyang resolved to try again to end enmity, this time using its missiles as inducement. On June 16, 1998, Pyongyang publicly offered to negotiate an end to its development as well as export of ballistic missiles. Development meant not only tests but also production of missiles for testing. Pyongyang also warned that if the United States was unwilling to declare an end to enmity, it would keep testing missiles - a threat it carried out on August 31, when it launched a three-stage rocket in an unsuccessful attempt to put a satellite into orbit.

Pyongyang's bargaining tactics led many to conclude that it was engaging in blackmail in an attempt to obtain economic aid without giving up anything in return. It was not. It was playing tit for tat, cooperating whenever Washington cooperated and retaliating when Washington reneged, in an effort to end enmity.

To read the full report, please visit:

http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002_12/sigal_dec02.asp

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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[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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