

Policy Forum 01-02E: North Korea Policy: Steady As She Goes

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North Korea Policy: Steady As She Goes

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 fifth in a series on the future of US relations with Northeast Asian countries under the administration of incoming US President George W. Bush.

William J. Taylor argues that the Bush administration, as it works to set its foreign policy, should retain the Clinton administration's approach to the two Koreas. Taylor defends the cautious North Korean pace of responding to the South and to the US and cites several positive developments in recent years with North Korea. Taylor argues that its unwillingness to negotiate a deal on stopping its missile program is justified by KEDO's slow pace in bringing the reactors on-line.

II. Essay by William J. Taylor

"North Korea Policy: Steady As She Goes"

By William J. Taylor

It is hard to recall a time when there was as much uncertainty about America's foreign policy strategy as the situation we confront now. Our foreign relations are frayed or tenuous worldwide. The assemblage of great foreign policy talent in the Bush Administration has its hands full in getting U.S. foreign policy on a coherent track. Part of the challenge will be to set foreign policy priorities and to understand what needs to be changed and what doesn't. U.S. policy toward the two Koreas falls into the latter category, best described by the old axiom "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Why? The one foreign policy strategy that the Clinton Administration got right was our approach toward the two Koreas. Following the "nuclear crisis" with North Korea in the spring/summer 1994, then Ambassador Robert Gallucci negotiated the nuclear Agreed Framework under which Pyongyang agreed to shut down its nuclear facilities near Pyongyang in exchange for a U.S. pledge to lead an international consortium to construct two light water reactors in the North and to provide annually 500,000 metric tons of heavy oil until the reactors are completed. The crisis occurred because the CIA estimated in March 1994 that North Korea was rushing toward production of nuclear weapons. Seven years later, North Korea's nuclear facilities capable of producing weapons-grade material remain shut down and inspections have revealed no new facilities. Unfortunately, Pyongyang continued to move on other threatening fronts by testing and selling to the likes of Iran and Syria long-range missiles and related technology. The greatest threat emerged when North Korea tested a Taepo-dong missile which flew over Japan in August 1998, a missile which, if further tested, would be able to reach all 50 Continental United States according to The Rumsfeld Commission. Subsequently, the Clinton Administration got Pyongyang's agreement to enter missile negotiations and to declare a moratorium on missile tests while negotiations continue. North Korea has not tested long-range missiles for the past 2 1/2 years.

In the meantime, newly-elected South Korean President Kim, Dae-jung announced in February 1998 his new "Sunshine Policy" toward North Korea reaffirming the necessity of maintaining a strong defense against the North's formidable military capabilities, while launching separate political and economic initiatives whose objective is "peaceful coexistence" between the Koreas. The Clinton Administration wisely embraced the Sunshine Policy with its own policy of "constructive engagement." Unfortunately, the pace of tangible change in North Korean behavior has been perceived as slow-- maddeningly slow for conservatives in the legislatures of Seoul and Washington who want to see Pyongyang enter into and execute balanced and verifiable political, military and economic agreements with Seoul and Washington. There is little comprehension in those political quarters that, given North Korea's prevailing political ideology, five decades of distrust of "imperialist motives," and a "stressed out" government bureaucracy generally untrained and uneducated by Western universities in the technicalities of free-market business, contract and insurance law, or even arms control practices, Pyongyang has come a long way in warming up to the rays of sunshine from Seoul supported by Washington and Tokyo over the past three years.

What's the evidence? A continuing, albeit tenuous, moratorium on North Korean missile tests; no known North Korean nuclear reactor activity; a N-S Summit with a reciprocal on the horizon; continuing, though maddeningly-slow, KEDO work on light water reactors; a major North Korean initiative supported by South Korea to normalize relations with nations worldwide; the Albright/Cho precedent for high-level U.S-North Korea government exchanges; three sets of exchanges among Korean families separated since the Korean War; four rounds of high-level N-S government talks with a fifth proposed; N-S military exchanges; agreed plans for reconnecting a N-S rail line and highway; acceleration of N-S cultural exchanges-and more. Considered cumulatively, these efforts are getting close to the definition of "rapprochement."

So, what's the problem right now? We're hung up in the missile talks. The North Koreans are in

critical need of energy for their nearly-failed economy and are incensed by the slow progress of KEDO. The Bush Administration, like its predecessor, is frustrated primarily by North Korea's demands for free launches of its satellites as well as payments to offset its huge loss of revenue should it accept a verifiable agreement to stop developing and selling missile technology and missiles abroad to others on the U.S. list of "states of concern." Are we at an impasse where U.S. "tough talk" may substitute for patient diplomacy? That's dangerous.

So far, the Sunshine policy and constructive engagement have bought us a relaxation of tensions along the heavily fortified Demilitarized Zone. Historically, wars often have started by accident or miscalculation at times of high tension. Those who now wish to push Pyongyang harder and faster toward greater reciprocity, i.e. "get tough," invite a return of tensions. Of course, a N-S war would be won quickly by the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command, but it would be a Pyrrhic victory in which hundreds of thousands of American civilians and armed forces personnel and our allies in South Korea and Japan would become casualties in the first few days under a heavy rain of surface-to-surface missiles, long-range artillery and multiple rocket launchers armed with chemical, biological and high-explosive warheads. This is well-known to U.S. and allied military planners.

As President Kim, Dae-jung has told me twice in private meetings, he sees no safe or sane alternative to the course on which we embarked three years. Surely, that is what he will try to get across to the Bush Administration. Diplomacy is the art of the possible and our strategic direction with North Korea should be "steady as she goes."

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