

Policy Forum 03-03A: Putting Pressure on Rogues

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By Gavan McCormack

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I. Introduction

North Korea is accused of many things, often encapsulated in the term "rogue state." Steps are now being taken to apply pressure to bring it back in line with its international obligations, especially those under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Even Australia has become involved, dispatching a three-man mission to Pyongyang. This short paper considers the question of roguishness in international behavior, the appropriateness of international pressure to resolve the problem, and the implications of the widening rift between Washington, persisting in its Cold War policies of containment and Seoul, where confidence in the efficacy of engagement grows.

Gavan McCormack is research professor of East Asian History at the Australian National University. He is co-author of *Korea since 1850* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1993). Other recent essays of his on North Korea may be found in [New Left Review](#) , November-December 2002, in [The Sydney Morning Herald](#) , 8 January 2003 and [Z Magazine](#) .

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II. Essay by Gavan McCormack

"Putting Pressure on Rogues"

by Gavan McCormack

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North Korea's January 10, 2003 announcement of withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) created uproar. A "rogue regime," it seems, was defying the world and threatening regional and global order. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) gave Pyongyang "one last chance" to return to the fold and the UN Security Council began to consider possible sanctions.

Early in 2002, George W. Bush described North Korea as "the world's most dangerous regime." Subsequently he said that he "loathed" its leader, Kim Jong Il, whom he called a "pygmy," and "a spoiled child at the dinner table." Japan's Prime Minister calls North Korea a "disgraceful" country and his chief cabinet secretary says it is "crazy." British, French, German, Russian, Chinese, and other governments demand that Pyongyang rescind its decision. American and Japanese officials fly about the region, and a three-man Australian delegation has gone to Pyongyang, to bring concentrated pressure to bear.

However, while the present crisis was clearly precipitated by Pyongyang's decision, that decision is rooted in the long US refusal to abide by the only international agreement ever between the two countries - the Geneva "Agreed Framework" of 1994. The "Framework" was never taken seriously by Washington and Pyongyang seems to have come to the conclusion that the cancellation of scheduled oil shipments in December 2002 was the last straw. Not one of the countries showing concern over the present problem draws attention to the US responsibility in this matter or sees anything roguish in the US refusal to honor its commitments. As for the issue of nuclear threat, Washington has been threatening Pyongyang with nuclear weapons for fifty years and in 2002 included it specifically on the list of target states in the "Nuclear Posture Review." Most recently the US has sought to lower the threshold for use of nuclear weapons by making low-yield tactical nukes (as well as depleted uranium coated shells) available for battlefield use. Yet it is Pyongyang, not Washington, that is accused of "intimidation" and irrational behavior.

After the advent of the Bush administration, Pyongyang continued to hold fast to the "Framework," as even Colin Powell recognized in February 2002, hoping against hope to secure removal from the list of terror-supporting states and to redeem the pledge of normalization given in 1994. Although it denounced the September 11 attacks on the US and moved promptly to ratify all outstanding international conventions on terrorism, and although the Department of State could find no terror connection other than the continued refuge in Pyongyang of the aging Japanese perpetrators of a 1970 hijacking, George W. Bush nevertheless chose to describe it as part of the "axis of evil." It is true, as was later learned, that North Korea had been responsible in the 1970s and early 1980s for a series of abductions and in the 1990s for "spy ship" intrusions (into Japanese waters), but in September 2002 those were admitted, apology proffered, and formal commitment given that they would not be repeated.

However regrettable Pyongyang's withdrawal from the NPT, what it seeks is the same diplomatic and economic normalization and removal from the US nuclear target list that were promised it in 1994. It told James Kelly in October 2002 that in return it would pledge full compliance with the safeguards regime. This is the behavior that Secretary of State Powell described as "intimidation," which the US would not reward. Pyongyang has also adopted a series of drastic reforms indicative of a desire to follow China's market reforms and Soviet perestroika-type opening. Around 1,000 officials have been sent to study abroad, mainly economics and mainly in Western universities. But such fundamental reform is virtually impossible under conditions of continuing siege. Washington's uncompromising hostility has not softened. Its fundamentalist mindset admits of no negotiation with "evil."

Little noticed, the current brouhaha also sets in relief a growing rift between Washington and Seoul over the agenda for the future of the region, one that has widened perceptibly since the advent of the Bush administration. South Korea's Nobel prize winning president, Kim Dae Jung, was insulted by Bush on his first visit to Washington (March 2001) and has been treated high-handedly, and occasionally contemptuously, ever since. South Korean attitudes towards the US have chilled perceptibly as a result. In various recent opinion surveys, more than half of people in South Korea profess "dislike" for, and only 31 per cent support cooperation with, the US. Between 60 and 70 per cent say they no longer see North Korea as a threat, favor normalization with it, and oppose US attempts at "containment."

After fifty years of living with the US containment formula, Seoul opted for engagement, what it describes as a "Sunshine" policy. Following the bold initiative of Kim's visit to Pyongyang in June 2000, South Korea engaged North Korea on a wide range of economic, cultural, sporting and transport fronts, and slowly accomplishes something once thought impossible - the restoration of a measure of trust between north and south, one Korea and the other. The Seoul-Pyongyang railway line has been cleared of mines and could be restored to service in months. It is blocked now only by Washington's insistence on keeping up the "pressure." The pipeline is full of joint South-North projects, including one to open Kaesong city in North Korea, roughly equidistant from Seoul and Pyongyang, as a special economic zone. That too is now frozen. If Pyongyang is "evil," then there can be no compromise with it and Seoul's "sunshine" policy is vain and pointless.

Roh Moo-Hyun, elected president in December 2002, is plainly representative of the new mood, more independent-minded, more skeptical if not positively critical of US intentions, more confident of South Korea's ability to negotiate with the North and in due course settle the national question. Following his election, senior American officials rushed to Seoul to 'speed up bilateral policy coordination' (as the Japanese conservative Yomiuri delicately put it), meaning to bring him in line. The Washington meeting of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (US, Japan, South Korea) early in January had the same purpose - to impose a tight rein on South Korea. The

engagement policy is a growing thorn in the side of US plans for regional and global order. It is not only Pyongyang that has to be contained, but Seoul too.

Washington has a lot to lose if this engagement were actually to lead to peaceful negotiated settlement of the Korean problem. If North Korea were removed from the "axis of evil," evil would become synonymous with Islamic (and US policy accordingly more difficult to sustain), the rationale for the US bases in Japan and Korea, and for the planned, prodigiously expensive, missile defense system (and a corresponding one for Japan) would likewise vanish.

The mission to put "pressure" on Pyongyang to secure its compliance is led by Tokyo and Canberra, Washington's two faithful aides. Neither has ever shown any concern at their own incorporation in the nuclear strategy of the US, or at the constant nuclear threats against North Korea. Washington's near monopoly of the global weapons trade or its unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Biological Weapons Convention, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the International Court of Criminal Justice and the Kyoto Convention on Global Warming (among others) appear to concern them little. They certainly see nothing roguish in it. Seeking to step up the pressure on Pyongyang, they forget the lesson of history: a desperate, impoverished but proud people, pushed against the wall, oil supplies cut off and sanctions threatened, is not likely to surrender. One would have thought that Japan, at least, would realize this.

Instead of the futile Canberra mission to put pressure on Pyongyang, a delegation to Seoul (followed by visits to Tokyo, Beijing and Moscow) to express Australian support for continued, or expanded 'Sunshine' policies, and to put together a concerted pressure on Washington to bring it to honor its 1994 commitments (and thereby bring the Korean War of 1950-1953 to an end with a formal peace agreement at last), is the sort of Australian diplomatic initiative that might be productive. It has to be said, however, that it is about as likely as an invitation for Kim Jong Il to a barbeque at the Bush ranch in Texas.

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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