

Policy Forum 02-11A: Pyongyang's new strategy of 'Frank Admission'



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by Jekuk Chang

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I. Introduction

The essay below is by Jekuk Chang, a Tokyo based attorney-at-law and Visiting Fellow at Keio University in Tokyo, who is currently working on a book on "Clinton's policy toward North Korea, 1993-2000. Change asserts that Pyongyang's recent admission of secret nuclear program has to be viewed as an effort to build up its credibility with the United States, although the burden of proof lies squarely with North Korea. At the same time, however, Washington must also be prepared to give Pyongyang some breathing space if it hopes to achieve its ultimate objectives involving North Korea.

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II. Essay by Jekuk Chang

"Pyongyang's new strategy of 'Frank Admission'"

By Jekuk Chang, Ph.D.

North Korea has once again stunned the world, this time by suddenly admitting that it has been conducting a secret nuclear weapons program, despite having signed the 1994 Geneva Framework Agreement with the United States. Pyongyang's new strategy of 'frank admission' and Pyongyang's confession of its wrongdoings to visiting US Assistant Secretary, James Kelly, should be viewed as part of a newly adopted strategy of "frank admission" of past wrongs. North Korea surprised the world when it took the opportunity during Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang in September, not only to candidly acknowledge that it had abducted Japanese nationals, but also to inform the world that eight of them had already died. "The Dear Leader," Kim Jong Il, even apologized to Prime Minister Koizumi for what had happened, and promised that it would never happen again. He went on to blame his subordinates, saying that they had committed the crimes without his knowledge.

Despite the rumors, exactly how Kim Jong Il came to make the unprecedented decision to confess is unknown, and will likely remain that way for some time. However, what is clear is that it was indeed a bold decision, and one which could prove very risky for both Kim and his country, as it could bring about his political downfall. Although many analysts are of the view that no faction exists within the ruling clique in North Korea that could topple Kim, his humiliating apology to the "imperialist" Japanese must have caused some frustration within the various power groups. Kim may have thought that there was a greater risk in doing nothing about the worsening economic situation, than in admitting the abductions and apologizing to the Japanese. Nevertheless, Kim's actions imply strongly that he is serious about establishing relations with Japan by clearing away this old stumbling block between the two countries.

Pyongyang's recent admission of its secret nuclear program could pose a similar threat to Kim Jong's North Korea, this time by inducing Washington to regard Pyongyang as it does Iraqi. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the North Korean side had carefully studied the possible effects of their continued denial on future negotiations with the United States.

Apparently, Kim Jong Il decided to put the regime's survival at risk by revealing the secret program, in the hope that Washington was less likely to slam the door on negotiations if they made a frank

admission now, than if the truth were to be revealed later, especially during the negotiation process. Hence, it may be wrong to believe that this sudden about-face is another form of the brinkmanship that was utilized extensively during North Korea's negotiations with the Clinton administration. Rather, it has to be viewed as an effort to build up North Korea's credibility with the United States.

Nevertheless, the North Koreans haven't played all their cards just yet; unlike Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi, US Assistant Secretary Kelly received no apology from the North Korean for any past wrongdoing, neither did Pyongyang promise to suspend its nuclear program, and nor was there any mention of receiving IAEA inspectors. More than likely they intend to make the apology and to undertake the complete termination of the secret nuclear program at some strategic point during the negotiation process.

Stronger Case for the Hawks Behind the sadness and seriousness of North Korea's recent admissions of guilt lies the reality that their sudden frankness weakens the positions of those who have been advocating engagement with the North Koreans. In the case of South Korea, as soon as the secret nuclear weapons program was made known, President Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine Policy came in for heavy criticism from the conservatives, further weakening an already lame-duck government. As for Prime Minister Koizumi, his initiatives to normalize relations with North Korea are likely to be seriously challenged both at home and in the United States. Needless to say, the current policy of differentiating between North Korea and Iraq in order to resolve problems associated with "The Axis of Evil" will also be affected. The hawks in Washington now have a stronger case than those who seek dialogue with Pyongyang, as worries about Pyongyang developing weapons of mass destruction have proven to be justified. Indeed, Washington has every reason to view Pyongyang with a great deal of skepticism.

Hence the burden of proof lies squarely with North Korea. Having failed to honor even the first cornerstone agreement to be established between Pyongyang and Washington, simply confessing past wrongdoings and listing new promises is bound to not work this time. Pyongyang will have to demonstrate that it understands the seriousness of dishonoring this agreement, and it will have to provide proof positive that it has given up its ambition of becoming a nuclear power if it is to convince Washington and the conservatives in Japan and South Korea that it is willing to make some "changes" to its relations with the United States and Japan.

Furthermore, while President Kim Dae Jung continues to lose power and influence, Kim Jong Il cannot expect any psychological support from that quarter. Hence the situation for Kim Jong Il is certainly the most difficult he has experienced since coming to power. It may even be the most precarious position North Korea has found itself in throughout its history. Any slight miscalculation could lead to an instant crisis.

Contradiction between North Korea's 'Frankness Strategy' and its Negative Image The most important factor in the negotiation process with Pyongyang is how to handle the contradiction between North Korea's recent 'frankness' and its overwhelmingly negative image. Pyongyang is probably feeling rather annoyed by the extremely negative reactions it is receiving from the Japanese public, despite the Great Leader's unprecedented admission and his apology on the abduction issue. Certainly its frustration after its admission to Mr. Kelly concerning the nuclear program has been well documented in its official media. Pyongyang appears to feel hard-done-by, believing that it has done what it has been asked to do, only to receive more intensified criticism.

Certainly, the negotiation environment for Pyongyang is deteriorating significantly, as the hawks in Seoul-Tokyo-Washington continue to gain the high ground. The United States' demands of Pyongyang in the negotiation process will undoubtedly be harsher and tougher in the future, and it will definitely require concrete and verifiable evidence of North Korea's willingness to concede on

issues of concern. In fact what Washington is asking for now amounts to the complete surrender of all of Pyongyang's remaining negotiation cards. However, if Washington does not allow Pyongyang any breathing space at this point, a crisis is inevitable.

The Choices Available to Seoul-Tokyo-Washington The time has come for Seoul-Tokyo-Washington to make a fundamental policy decision: Do they still want to keep Kim Jong Il as a player, or do they want to give up playing Kim's game entirely?

If they choose the former, the bottom line is they will have to give Kim Jong Il one more chance to play his part by giving him some room to move during the negotiation process. In other words, Seoul-Tokyo-Washington will have to "support" Kim's efforts to lead a nuclear-free North Korea. For this to happen, North Korea will have to provide tangible evidence, and in a timely manner, that proves it is prepared to give up its nuclear ambition, if it has one.

If the latter is chosen, if the three decide not to risk any further deception by refusing to deal with Kim Jong Il, they must be prepared for the total collapse of North Korea, which will undoubtedly cause major problems in the region, none of which I want to reiterate in this paper because they have been fully elaborated on elsewhere. The real challenge to Seoul-Tokyo-Washington, however, may be whether the three parties can even agree on a grand policy of what to do with Pyongyang, as each has different, immediate interests in mind.

Pyongyang now has the burden of proof. It has to convince the world that the reason behind its recent frankness is its sincere wish to establish relations with Japan and the United States. To achieve this, it must show that it is prepared to give up its nuclear aspirations and make major concessions on other issues of concern. At the same time, Washington must be prepared to give Pyongyang some breathing space during the negotiation process if it hopes to achieve its ultimate objectives involving North Korea.

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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