Policy Forum 99-07C: Seizing Opportunity in North Korea

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Seizing an Opportunity in North Korea

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I. Introduction

This is the third in a series of articles on the recent developments in US-DPRK relations. This essay was contributed by Jon Brook Wolfsthal, an associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in Washington, DC, and a former official of the US Department of Energy. This article was originally published in the Christian Science Monitor on September 21, 1999.

Wolfstahl argues that the recent Berlin agreement between the US and the DPRK represents an opportunity to improve US-DPRK relations. He faults the Clinton administration for only concentrating on the DPRK when it takes provocative actions, and argues that, to prevent future tension, the US should move ahead to improve relations as it promised to do in 1994.

II. Essay by Jon Wolfstahl

"Seizing an opportunity in N. Korea" By Jon Brook Wolfsthal

The threatened test of North Korea's long-range Taepo-Dong II missile has apparently been averted - for now. United States-North Korea talks produced a loose pledge this month from the North not to take any actions that would disrupt improving relations so long as talks continue.

Washington officials interpret this pledge to include a ban on missile tests and North Korea has not challenged this view. While North Korean promises shouldn't be taken at face value, and our intelligence assets must remain focused on North Korea's missile and nuclear facilities, this initial agreement is a welcome step toward a more stable East Asia.

In order to prevent further regional flare-ups, Washington must now do what it failed to do in 1994 - take the opportunity to improve relations and establish diplomatic and economic contacts in exchange for an end to North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons programs.

The current situation is nearly identical to the one that followed the signing of a nuclear "Agreed Framework" between Pyongyang and Washington in 1994. At that time North Korea agreed to "freeze" its nuclear program in exchange for modern, proliferation-resistant nuclear reactors and closer relations with the US, including establishment of diplomatic and economic relations. The deal ended what appeared to be a headlong rush toward armed conflict and, despite allegations of cheating, North Korea's nuclear program remains frozen to this day.

For its part, the US has formed an international coalition, including Japan and South Korea, to build new reactors in the North. But the US has been slow to meet its other obligations, such as providing the North with heating fuel, and establishing diplomatic and economic contacts.

North Korea has reacted angrily to these delays and, now, has successfully used the threat of additional missile tests to re-capture Washington's attention.

There has been a disturbing tendency in the Clinton administration to focus mainly on issues in the headlines and then quickly lose interest as issues lose their public presence. Now, after failing to stay on target in 1994, Washington has a second chance to improve the security outlook for the entire East Asian region by seizing the opening, provided by the latest missile deal, to establish diplomatic and economic ties with the North.

Former Secretary of Defense William Perry, serving as President Clinton's special adviser on North Korea, has reportedly proposed a package deal of incentives and concessions to the North after visiting there last winter. While details have not been made public, the proposal may have led to North Korea's renewed willingness to negotiate.

The unpredictable North Korea has now firmly established a fixed pattern of brinkmanship, followed by a willingness to negotiate an end to weapons programs in exchange for economic and diplomatic ties. In order to avoid further trips to the edge, the US and its allies should seize the new opening and take the following steps:

* The US should agree to open a consulate in Pyongyang in exchange for a written pledge by the North not to flight-test any long-range missiles. North Korea has been pushing for more formal diplomatic relations with the US since South Korea established formal ties with its longtime allies, Russia and China. A written pledge, while not legally binding, would help solidify international support against North Korea should it later decide to proceed with its missile program.

* The US and its allies should agree to lift key economic and trade sanctions against the North, in exchange for a signed and verified commitment by the North not to transfer missile technology or equipment to other states - especially Iran or Pakistan. Stopping North Korea's exports of missile

technology would cap the single greatest source of ballistic missiles on the global black market. Lifting sanctions would allow North Korea to export raw materials and gain foreign currency, which could pay for much needed agricultural assistance. In addition, food aid for the coming winter should be promised now, with appropriate safeguards to ensure it actually helps feed the entire population and not just the military.

* The US, South Korea, and Japan, with the cooperation of China, should work to implement a broader set of diplomatic and economic steps along the lines of those proposed by Mr. Perry. While the security situation is not yet ripe for such a package deal to take root, a freeze on North Korea's missile program and its nuclear activities at least allows both countries to pursue talks on more normal relations.

As part of the US team implementing the 1994 Agreed Framework in North Korea, I saw how much North Koreans valued the possibility of normal ties with the US. Joining the international community, with the promise of improved economic conditions, is a powerful lure that can be used effectively to lead Pyongyang away from developing weapons of mass destruction.

But reaching such a deal will require the Clinton administration - and its successor - to stay on target and follow through on this month's agreement.

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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