

Policy Forum 99-07I: The Perry Report: Scenario for a Collision Course?



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The Perry Report: A Scenario for a Collision Course?

By Hwal-Woong Lee, Korea 2000

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I. Introduction

This is the latest of a series of articles on the recent developments in US-DPRK relations. This essay was contributed by Hwal-Woong Lee, former Foreign Service Officer for the ROK Government (56-71) and ROK Consul in New York (59-61) and in Los Angeles (68-71). He has been writing articles and letters on Korean problems in various newspapers and magazines since 1984, and has served as President of the Korea Reunification Forum (94-95) and a Fellow at Korea-2000, an LA based research council on Korean reunification (97-99). He is currently working on his third book, to be entitled "For a Reunification where no one loses."

The author argues that the Perry Report offers little hope to end the DPRK's weapons of mass destruction programs, which he says are a response to the US threat to the DPRK's security. He maintains that, in the absence of a political solution that would include the withdrawal of US troops from the ROK, the Perry Report only puts the US and the DPRK on a course to eventual conflict.

II. Essay by Hwal-Woong Lee

Perry Report - A Scenario for Collision Course? By Hwal-Woong Lee

The new report on U.S. policy toward North Korea prepared by Dr. William J. Perry, Special Advisor to the President and the Secretary of State, was published by the State Department on October 12, 1999. Separately, Dr. Perry himself summarized his report in his column "Korea: Why We Can't Stand Still" carried by the Washington Post on October 18, 1999.

The Perry Report, in a nutshell, recommends the following. (1) North Korea's nuclear and missile programs are destabilizing factors and the U.S. should negotiate with Pyongyang for the North's total renunciation of these programs. (2) In a step-by-step and reciprocal fashion, the U.S. should, in alliance with South Korea and Japan, reduce pressures that North Korea perceives as threatening, normalize relations with it, relax sanctions against it and take other positive steps that would provide opportunities for the Pyongyang regime. (3) If North Korea would not come along and the negotiations fail to produce desired results, the U.S. and the allies should take specific steps to contain the North Korean threat. (4) The U.S. must not withdraw any of its forces from Korea.

Noting some recent exchanges of positive gestures between Washington and Pyongyang, Perry predicted in his column that a senior North Korean official's visit to Washington will be forthcoming. He further expressed his hope that the implementation of these measures, if met by North Korea's positive response, will result in a secure, stable and prosperous Korean Peninsula after decades of insecurity. Would it? I doubt that it would.

First of all, the Perry Report is based on the belief that U.S. forces and alliances in the region are strong, and that North Korea understands this. It, therefore, envisions a solution to the problem by intimidation, not by reason. It recommends that the U.S. should first try to persuade North Korea to accept U.S. demands by offering some reciprocal benefits and then resort to certain forcible steps if the North would not come along. This is the same old "carrot and stick" strategy, which has already been proved ineffective.

Secondly, Perry's theory is self-contradictory. He presupposes that there has been "security" in Korea thanks to the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea and, therefore, insists that the U.S. must not withdraw them. Yet, he predicts that the measures he recommends could lead to a secure, stable and prosperous Korean peninsula "after decades of insecurity," admitting that there has been no "security" in Korea.

Thirdly, Perry has failed to realize the real nature of long confrontation between the U.S. and North Korea. For three years from 1950, the U.S. fought a war with North Korea with an intention to obliterate it. The armistice agreement of 1953 was simply a military arrangement to pause the hostilities in the battlefields. Forty-six years later, the situation in the Korean peninsula today still remains a military stalemate that has yet to be superseded by a political solution, such as the conclusion of a peace treaty. By narrowly focusing on military questions alone, namely the North's nuclear and missile programs, the Perry Report failed to provide any basis for a political solution to end the military stalemate on the Korean peninsula.

Fourthly, Perry has ignored, perhaps purposefully, the unquestionable link between the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea and the existence of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. Although the U.S. contends that American forces in South Korea are necessary for the security of the peninsula, their presence has been the main threat to the security of North Korea, thus driving the North Koreans to pursue WMD programs in their desperate efforts to defend themselves from possible U.S. attack. To put it straight, the North's WMD programs are the inevitable effects of the U.S. military presence in the South.

My observation is that, given its population, economy and military strength, North Korea has no motivation to provoke a military confrontation with the U.S., the only super-power of the world. They

may, therefore, want to keep a dialogue with the U.S. going and try to take whatever is obtainable from the U.S. so long as they are not inexorably pressed for total renunciation of WMD programs. Once pressed for that, however, Pyongyang will not be able to go along any further, especially under the circumstances where U.S. forces are there in South Korea pointing guns at them. This will oblige the U.S. to take what Perry calls the second path steps to contain what it considers a threat from the North, an implying the use of force.

If Washington is serious about making peace with Pyongyang, it should recognize that the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea is a sheer threat to the North's security and, therefore, it should eliminate, not just reduce, this threat. Otherwise, North Korea simply cannot give up its WMD programs. The only practical way of inducing the North's agreement to total renunciation of its WMD programs will, therefore, be to barter it for American consent to a phased withdrawal of its forces from the South. Actual implementation of such deal should of course be preceded by a political arrangement for general arms reductions and non-aggression pledges by the parties concerned.

In the absence of these crucial elements, the Perry Report, I am afraid, is nothing more than a scenario for collision course.

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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Nautilus Institute

2342 Shattuck Ave. #300, Berkeley, CA 94704 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org