Policy Forum 99-07B: The Road from Berlin

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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 99-07B: The Road from Berlin", NAPSNet Policy Forum, September 21, 1999, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/nautilus-institute-policy-forum-online--he-road-from-berlin/

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PFO 99-07B: September 21, 1999

The Road from Berlin

By Nicholas Eberstadt, American Enterprise Institute

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I. Introduction

This essay was contributed by Nicholas Eberstadt, a researcher with the American Enterprise Institute and author of the forthcoming book, "The End of North Korea." A version of this essay ran in the Chosun Ilbo on September 13.

Eberstadt argues that the recent US-DPRK agreement is unlikely to lead to an opening of relations and an end of the DPRK's missile program. He notes that for the DPRK to open up to outside trade and investment would go against its ruling philosophy. He also argues that the DPRK sees missile and nuclear development as vital to its national interests, and thus is unlikely to trade them for better relations with the US.

II. Essay by Nicholas Eberstadt

"The Road From Berlin" by Nicholas Eberstadt

Reports that American and North Korean negotiators have emerged from six days of missile talks in Berlin with a "breakthrough" accord--albeit an unwritten one--are being greeted today with relief,

and even elation, by official circles in Seoul and Washington. While such emotions may be understandable, such a judgment is more difficult to justify.

Publicly, Washington and Pyongyang concluded their Berlin sessions on Sunday with only a brief joint statement agreeing that the talks had been "businesslike" and "productive"--diplomatic euphemisms that usually signify an impasse. But American negotiators reportedly also obtained behind-the-scene assurances from DPRK Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan's team that Pyongyang would not conduct any additional long-range missile tests (with a quid pro quo that the US drop its "Trading With The Enemy Act" economic strictures against North Korea).

Those private assurances, in turn, were taken as signals that the North Korean government is interested in accepting the deal outlined by former US Defense Secretary William J. Perry in his visit to Pyongyang last May. Although the "Perry Report" has never been publicly released, it supposedly offers Pyongyang a sort of strategic "grand bargain": normalization of economic and diplomatic relations with the US (and also, perhaps, financial assistance) in return for a true and final halt to the DPRK's nuclear weapon and ballistic missile development programs.

High-level response to the reported Berlin breakthrough was enthusiastic, and almost instantaneous. On the very day that the Berlin talks concluded, President Kim Dae Jung, US President Bill Clinton, and Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo issued a joint statement from their Auckland APEC conference, confirming their readiness to improve relations with and extend economic incentives to North Korea if the DPRK would take steps to reduce the international tensions it causes and to promote peace in the Korean peninsula.

At least some officials clearly view the reported breakthrough as a major success, for they have already begun laying claims for its credit. ROK Presidential spokesman Park Jun-young, for example, attributed the Berlin "agreement" to "the [Kim Dae Jung] government's policy of engagement" (but also recognizing Tokyo and Washington for their "close cooperation" in the endeavor).

Any and all signs of international moderation, or gestures of conciliation, by the North Korean regime are, of course, to be welcomed. But the euphoria already evident in some quarters about the results of the Berlin talks is--to say the lest--somewhat premature.

Any freely-accepted deal worth the name must serve the interests of both sides. The deal (and path) envisioned by the Perry team and the architects of the ROK's "sunshine" engagement policy would obviously serve the interests of Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul. If effected, it would resolve a major international security concern for all of them at a minimal cost--and with some prospect of commercial gain. What remains rather less self-evident, however, is why the North Korean government should be expected to find the envisioned deals and paths attractive.

For ordinary governments, the prospect of access to the American market might be an enticement for considerable policy change--but the North Korean regime is no ordinary government. Given its current business practices--which include defiant defaults on debt, summary abrogation of signed contracts and studied disinterest in commercial commodity export--there is little scope for mutually beneficial trade between North Korean and the United States today, even if all American economic sanctions against the DPRK were summarily rescinded.

Furthermore, Pyongyang is unlikely to embrace the sorts of practices that would permit it to take advantage of the commercial opportunities in the American market, for it regards such changes as threats to the very survival of its system. North Korea's media have stated so repeatedly. To cite but one familiar formulation: "We must heighten vigilance against the imperialists' moves to induce us to 'reform' and 'opening to the outside world.' 'Reform' and 'opening' on their lips are a honey-coated

poison."

From the standpoint of North Korea's leadership, therefore, the presumed "carrot" of improved bilateral US-DPRK trade may not be a compelling inducement for concessions in other areas. Least of all, perhaps, concessions in the areas of nuclear weaponry and missile development. For credible military menace appears to lie at the very heart of North Korea's current economic strategy--and of its strategy for state survival.

This is not simply surmise: North Korean authorities have said as much. The same September 1998 Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) gathering that elevated Kim Jong Il to the DPRK's "highest post" also embraced a new official objective: to become a "powerful and prosperous state" [Kangsong Taeguk]. The precise meaning of the slogan was spelled out the following month, when Pyongyang declared that "defense capabilities are a military guarantee for national political independence and the self-reliant economy" and that "the nation can become prosperous only when the barrel of the gun is strong" (emphasis added).

By such reasoning, the acquisition and perfection of weapons of mass destruction seems rather more likely to be viewed as a vital national interest than a "problem" in search of resolution--and sovereign governments, as we know, very seldom negotiate away their own vital national interests.

There are a number of possible reasons that North Korean authorities might have agreed verbally in Berlin not launch another missile for now. (One of these reasons might be that the Taepo Dong II is not yet ready for testing!) But to believe that the North Korean government is ready to scrap its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and to recognize the legitimacy of the Republic of Korea--and to do all this so that it can pursue "globalization" with American, Japanese, and South Korean help--requires us to believe that DPRK leadership has abandoned the logic of the state structure it has so assiduously crafted for over half a century. Suffice it to say this is not the most parsimonious explanation for DPRK negotiating behavior at Berlin.

The Western allies, for their part, my want to review their own negotiating postures in the wake of Berlin and Auckland. President Kim Dae Jung's reported comment that another missile launch would not mean "the end of the earth" betrays a stunning indifference to the security of his Japanese and American partners, whose populations the Taepo Dong II is being constructed specifically to imperil. North Korean foreign policy has always been skillful at exploiting differences among its adversaries--and the differences in the ROK-US alliance seem to have widened a bit since the Berlin encounters.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

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