Policy Forum 00-07A: This Is No Way to Curb the North Korean Threat


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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 00-07A: This Is No Way to Curb the North Korean Threat", NAPSNet Policy Forum, October 29, 2000, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/nautilus-institute-policy--orum-online-this-is-no-way-to-curb-the-north-korean-threat/

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PFO 00-07A: October 29, 2000

This Is No Way to Curb the North Korean Threat

By Henry Sokolski

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December 1, 2000

I. Introduction

Henry Sokolski, executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center in Washington and author of the forthcoming "Best of Intentions: America's Campaign Against Strategic Weapons Proliferation," published an essay in The Washington Post on October 29, 2000. Sokolski argues that the 1994 Agreed Framework will provide the DPRK with dangerous nuclear technology and know-how. He further argues that a deal that helps the DPRK to launch satellites will provide it with the technology to perfect its long-range missiles. Nautilus will provide responses to this essay in a series examining the DPRK's offer to halt its missile development program in exchange for assistance with launching satellites into space.

II. Essay by Henry Sokolski

"This Is No Way to Curb the North Korean Threat"

When Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright said last week that she had made progress in her talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il over curbing his country's missile program, she offered few details. But, she said, they did discuss "the idea of exchanging satellite launches for serious missile restraint." That idea, based on a suggestion by Russian President Vladimir Putin, calls for the United States to pay a third party--probably Russia, China or Europe--to launch North Korea's satellites. In exchange, North Korea would restrain its missile program and, at a minimum, freeze development of its Taepo Dong series of long-range ballistic missiles, which could potentially reach the United States.

Given the threat these missiles pose, how could anyone object? Indeed, with the established precedent of Washington promising Pyongyang $4 billion in 1994 in the form of two new, U.S.-designed nuclear reactors (to be built by Japan and South Korea) in exchange for freezing its nuclear program, paying others to launch North Korean satellites seems pretty benign. It does, that is, until one considers what other technology is almost certain to be transferred. Two other recent satellite cooperation endeavors--Russia's assistance to India's satellite launch program and America's work with China since the early 1990s launching U.S. satellites--leave little question about what's at risk.

In the first case, India acquired the technology necessary to extend the range of its current rockets to reach Beijing. In the second case, China learned how to perfect space systems that can be adapted to deliver multiple nuclear warheads accurately.

As with the Agreed Framework of 1994, under which the U.S. government offered Pyongyang reactors capable of producing much more nuclear weapons material than its one small operating reactor could, a satellite deal would increase the North's deadly weapons capabilities. Consider this: Under the 1994 pact, Pyongyang agreed to freeze the operation of its existing plutonium production facilities, which it has done, and to eventually allow them to be dismantled and inspected in exchange for the new reactors. Under the missile deal now being considered, North Korea would freeze development of its intercontinental Taepo Dong missile systems in exchange for the United States paying another nation to launch Pyongyang's satellites. Under the '94 Framework, nuclear facilities and programs are exempt from being fully inspected or dismantled until a substantial portion of the reactors are completed--which will take some time. Together, the deals could help North Korea perfect a large nuclear rocket force that could reach the United States.

In the nuclear area, the Agreed Framework is beginning to supply what Pyongyang's military nuclear planners need most. Under it, South Korea must train roughly 1,000 North Korean nuclear technicians, which represents a vast increase in the number of people versed in nuclear operations. The framework also would, when fully implemented, result in a massive expansion of North Korea's nuclear materials production base. In 1994, Pyongyang could produce one to two bombs' worth of plutonium a year. With the two planned reactors, it could produce between 75 to 150 bombs' worth of nuclear material annually. And the one thing that North Korean military planners lack to perfect an intercontinental ballistic missile--a workable third or upper stage--is precisely the technology the satellite deal would be primed to provide. That's because any effort to launch a satellite intrinsically involves sharing information about how to launch it.

If Pyongyang can dictate the shape, volume, weight and fragility of the satellite being launched, it also can control the kind of technology needed to launch it. Is there any way to prevent North Korea from specifying a satellite that would require a reliable version of the upper stage that failed in its frightening August 1998 launch of a multi-stage rocket over Japan? What of preventing Pyongyang from specifying some other satellite that would require an upper stage that it could use on its more advanced Taepo Dong-2 launcher? Sadly, once one gets into the business of helping North Korea launch its satellites, running these risks is simply part of the cost of doing business.

On this last point, we have learned much from history. Just as the United States could not prevent China from gaining such information from U.S. space contractors and Russia could not live up to its pledges to block such technology from going to India, the prospects of keeping North Korea from securing such knowledge are slight. I learned that directly from officials in Moscow in the early 1990s as deputy for nonproliferation policy for Dick Cheney, who was then secretary of defense.

What, then, should we to do? To the extent that the nuclear problems associated with the Agreed Framework are similar to the missile risks of the proposed satellite idea, so, too, are their possible solutions.

In the case of the Agreed Framework, the United States is offering two reactors that will produce far more electricity than North Korea, with its limited electrical grid, can handle. This was driven home recently by a World Bank analysis done for the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO), an international group created by the framework to build the two reactors. Bradley Babson, the World Bank's senior adviser on North Korea, wrote that "if the nuclear plant project supported by KEDO was subjected to a normal World Bank project evaluation and appraisal, it would get an F." The reason, he explained, was that North Korea's capacity to generate and distribute electricity was far too meager to absorb even one of the proposed 1-gigawatt nuclear power reactors. Without the ability to exploit the electricity produced, he noted, Pyongyang would never be able to repay the interest-free loan it took out to pay for the reactors.

In fact, to meet U.S. and international safety standards (to ensure, for instance, that there is always sufficient electricity to operate the reactors' safety equipment), Pyongyang would have to rebuild most of its electrical distribution system and increase its electrical generating capacity at least five-fold. But to do this would require the construction of billions of dollars' worth of non-nuclear generating capacity. Why? Because increasing the amount of power on North Korea's grid by more than 5 to 10 percent would risk its disruption or destruction. The only efficient electrical plants that are small enough to avoid these dangers are non-nuclear. This, then, raises the question of why one would ever build nuclear reactors in North Korea the first place.

In 1998, at a forum I organized in Washington on the future of the '94 agreement, South Korean insiders told me that Pyongyang had been well aware of these points in 1994 and that it had requested of South Korea that one of the generating stations be non-nuclear. Soon after junior

officials in the South Korean and U.S. governments confirmed the story, but senior U.S. officials quickly denied it. Yet, the point lingers. If Pyongyang needs electrical power, would it not make sense for at least the first of the power stations to be non-nuclear and to tie the nuclear inspections and dismantling to this first power station's completion? Alternatively, KEDO could offer to revamp North Korea's existing electrical grid so it could take on more power as its economy grows.

Of course, the North Koreans might not agree. But shouldn't we ask? And if they refused such an offer, wouldn't this at least indicate what Pyongyang's true intentions are about whether it will dismantle its nuclear plants (to say nothing of how willing it is generally to cooperate with the United States, Japan and South Korea)?

As for its interest in space satellites, North Korea has no more a civilian need for satellites or space launch services than it does for nuclear electricity. A case might be made for it gaining access to the services satellites might provide, for example, imagery and communications. Yet, securing those services from the United States would be far cheaper and vastly superior to whatever peaceful civilian benefits Pyongyang might secure from launching its own crude satellites (even if Washington and its allies paid for such launches).

Another clear advantage of Washington and its allies offering Pyongyang such services is that they could make sure that shared imagery and communications services would not be used for military purposes. North Korea might request detailed photos of South Korean bases, but lacking any peaceful civilian purpose, the United States could deny the request. As for communications services, the United States might provide them so long as they were not encrypted. Access to such services might help open up North Korea to more peaceful development and although Pyongyang might reject such an offer, much would be learned by making it.

One thing is clear. It makes no more sense for the United States or its allies to help Pyongyang make more nuclear weapons material than it does for them to help Pyongyang perfect its long-range missiles. If the White House offers to pay contractors to loft North Korean satellites and doesn't substitute non-nuclear plants for the promised reactors, though, we may well end up doing both.

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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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)
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