

Policy Forum 09-067: No Rush to Talk With North Korea



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No Rush to Talk With North Korea

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By Andrei Lankov

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I. Introduction

Andrei Lankov, Associate Professor at Kookmin University, writes, "Perhaps the most important reason why Pyongyang should be engaged is the long-term domestic impact of talks. Negotiations and aid create an environment where contacts between the isolated population and the outside world steadily increase, exposing the total lie in which North Koreans have to live. In the long run, this will undermine the regime, bringing the country's radical transformation - and, probably, a solution of the nuclear issue."

II. Article by Andrei Lankov

- "No Rush to Talk With North Korea"

By Andrei Lankov

Bill Clinton's trip to Pyongyang and the release of the American journalists confirmed what many observers have suspected since early July: North Korea is indicating its willingness to re-start talks with the United States. There are reasons why Washington should not rush to the negotiation table immediately, but few people doubt that these talks will start relatively soon.

The negotiations are likely to be characterized as talks about getting the North to give up its nuclear weapons. But one should not be misled: No amount of diplomatic dealing can achieve that goal.

North Korea's leaders have good reasons to retain their nuclear program. First, they need a deterrent against foreign attack. Second, they need nuclear arms for domestic purposes: The nuclear weapons program is perhaps the only visible success of Kim Jong-il's rule. (It also serves as a helpful excuse for the regime's economic calamities).

But, above all, the nuclear program is a powerful diplomatic tool. North Korea cannot survive without foreign aid, which the regime uses to support those social groups whose loyalty is vital for internal stability. And nothing can rival a latent nuclear threat as means to obtain foreign aid.

It is often argued that North Korea might choose to surrender its nuclear weapons in exchange for a massive aid program. But Pyongyang cannot use the aid to kick-start its economy, because its leaders believe that economic reforms will be politically ruinous. Chinese-style reforms require a great deal of political liberalization. The spread of information about South Korea's economic success and political freedom would deliver a mortal blow to the regime's legitimacy.

In this situation, the most rational policy choice of the tiny Pyongyang elite is to avoid domestic reforms, keep interaction with the outside world at a bare minimum and, of course, engage in nuclear blackmail. The regime can alternate threats with hints at a possible solution, and even make promises of a complete de-nuclearization at some future point. The North has played this game for nearly two decades, with remarkable success.

As long as the country remains under the current regime's control, negotiations are not going to produce a non-nuclear North Korea. Nevertheless, there are at least four major reasons why North Korea should be engaged.

First, some useful compromises are achievable. It is possible to devise an agreement that would diminish the likelihood of nuclear proliferation by Pyongyang. After all, North Korean leaders understand that their current stockpile of weapons-grade plutonium is sufficient as a deterrent and blackmail tool, so additional production would not make much difference. They might even agree to demolish their Yongbyon research facilities, if the promised payoff is sufficiently high.

Second, talks lessen tensions and decrease the likelihood of a confrontation. Of course, Pyongyang diplomats might at any time resort to their favorite trick: Walk away from negotiations, launch a chain of provocations to increase tensions, and then return to negotiations in expectations of greater payoffs. But while talks are continuing, an accidental confrontation is less likely.

Third, talks will provide a line of communication that might become vital, since big changes are looming in Pyongyang: Recent photos leave no doubt that Kim Jong Il's health has deteriorated considerably.

Perhaps the most important reason why Pyongyang should be engaged is the long-term domestic impact of talks. Negotiations and aid create an environment where contacts between the isolated population and the outside world steadily increase, exposing the total lie in which North Koreans have to live. In the long run, this will undermine the regime, bringing the country's radical transformation - and, probably, a solution of the nuclear issue.

Nonetheless, future talks should be conducted without unrealistic expectations. There will be no breakthrough as long as the present regime runs the country. To keep Pyongyang engaged, something has to be given, but excessive generosity is not advisable: It will merely provoke more exercises in blackmail. There also is no need to hurry. It's time to realize that the North Korean problem has no quick fixes, but it can - and should - be managed.

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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