Policy Forum 09-052: North Korea and the Importance of Arms Control

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North Korea and the Importance of Arms Control

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By Donald G. Gross

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I. Introduction

Donald G. Gross, former counselor of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, writes, "The administration can strongly oppose nuclear proliferation while still upholding the principles of arms control that have helped keep America safe for more than a generation. A policy approach that

preserves an honored place for arms control negotiations is in the best interests of the United States and its allies, now and in the future."

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II. Article by Donald G. Gross

- "North Korea and the Importance of Arms Control"
By Donald G. Gross

Approximately four weeks after North Korea's nuclear test, the Obama administration has adopted the hard line approach to Pyongyang advocated by former Vice President Dick Cheney and his conservative allies. Sadly, the administration's new policy rejects the fundamental premises of arms control that have guided the U.S. government since the early 1970s.

The administration's decision to confront North Korea's cargo ships on the open seas and demand inspections is a risky one - which is why President George W. Bush refused to authorize it despite pressure from the Republican right-wing. A U.S. Navy-enforced inspection regime comes close to establishing a naval blockade, long recognized in international law as an act of war.

This policy also puts America's closest allies in East Asia in jeopardy: if Pyongyang lashes out with a military response, its primary targets would likely be Seoul and Tokyo.

The administration's new policy is founded on the critical but unproven assumption that North Korea has dropped its longstanding strategy of using its nuclear weapons capability as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the United States. Based on this assumption, the Administration says it will abandon the process of negotiating step-by-step reductions toward fully dismantling Pyongyang's program - the arms control approach the U.S. has pursued with North Korea and other countries for decades.

In fact, arms control diplomacy is an extremely valuable tool for strengthening U.S. security and reducing the chances of nuclear war, including in Northeast Asia. History demonstrates that arms control negotiations work, though they are often frustrating, tedious and long.

It is worth recalling that adversary states engage in arms control negotiations not out of altruism but from strong self-interest. These states seek to:

- Strengthen security and stability
- Prevent war or military confrontation
- Avoid costly and unnecessary arms races

Of necessity, arms control negotiations proceed step-by-step, as adversaries build confidence with each other. To succeed, negotiators rely on sticks and carrots - pressures and incentives - to achieve their goals. No state will reduce or give up a nuclear capability unless doing so will improve its security and help it achieve other national objectives, such as advancing economic development and overcoming internal social problems.

Without U.S.-Soviet arms control negotiations, there would have been no Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and no Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. These essential measures helped the U.S.

and Russia avoid the holocaust of nuclear war. They also laid the groundwork for reconciliation between the United States and Russia after the fall of the Soviet regime.

Consider the most recent successful arms control negotiation - which led to Libya's December 2003 declaration it would abandon all weapons of mass destruction. Within two months of Libya's announcement, British and American technicians removed about 55,000 pounds of nuclear equipment and more than 4,000 centrifuges for uranium enrichment from the country.

How did this happen? The answer is skillful diplomacy that relied on a combination of pressures and incentives.

Libya faced isolation and painful sanctions from the international community if it continued down a path of nuclear development. The U.S. and Britain offered Libya significant long-term diplomatic and economic benefits if it abandoned its WMD programs.

Military action was not necessary and would have been counter-productive. Britain and the U.S. persuaded Libya that its security and economic well-being were more assured by rejoining the international community than developing a nuclear arsenal.

Contrast this deliberate and patient approach with the Obama administration's current policy of discrediting past nuclear diplomacy with North Korea and squeezing Pyongyang so hard it could lash out at two of America's closest allies.

No doubt the Obama administration would like to avoid a military confrontation in Northeast Asia. But the measures it is taking, especially interdiction of North Korean vessels on the high seas, could spin out of control and trigger a devastating regional conflict - at a time when the U.S. is already over-stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The administration can strongly oppose nuclear proliferation while still upholding the principles of arms control that have helped keep America safe for more than a generation. A policy approach that preserves an honored place for arms control negotiations is in the best interests of the United States and its allies, now and in the future.

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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