

Policy Forum 09-021: North Korea Watches Washington

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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 09-021: North Korea Watches Washington", NAPSNet Policy Forum, March 17, 2009, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/north-korea-watches-washington/>

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Policy Forum Online 09-021A: March 17th, 2009

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I. Introduction

Tong Kim, Adjunct professor at SAIS, a research professor with the Ilmin Institute of International Relations, and a visiting professor of the Graduate University of North Korean Studies, writes, "As the North Koreans rewrite their talking points for future meetings, it is important for them to refrain from creating new problems either by launching a missile or even a satellite at this point or by making new unreasonable demands. Now the ball is back in Pyongyang's court to join international efforts to move the denuclearization process forward, and to seek its own interest of security

assurance and economic development."

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II. Article by Tong Kim

- "North Korea Watches Washington"

By Tong Kim

North Korea is getting ready to engage the Obama administration, which has started moving fast to seek ways to resolve the intractable issues of North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs. The direction of U.S. policy is clear in terms of both format and substance.

In format the Obama administration will pursue a combination of the Six Party Talks and a direct bilateral engagement with North Korea. To enforce direct diplomacy, Washington appointed Ambassador Stephen Bosworth as "senior emissary for U.S. engagement with North Korea," while keeping Ambassador Sung Kim to take care of "day to day efforts" and to lead the U.S. delegation in the Six Party Talks.

In substance, the Obama administration has refused to accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. Its goal is to seek the complete verifiable denuclearization of North Korea, to contain proliferation of nuclear technology, to stem North Korea's missile program and to address its human rights and humanitarian challenges.

If Washington fails in denuclearization efforts, it might end up managing a nuclear North Korea, with the reduced purpose of capping Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal and preventing proliferation. However, this approach would not be considered unless and until the renewed U.S. policy of a nuclear free Korean Peninsula fails. President Obama has plenty of time and resources to work for success on the issue.

While Ambassador Bosworth is visiting Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul and Moscow this week, it is not yet clear when the next round of the Six Party Talks or a U.S.-DPRK bilateral meeting will take place. The reports of a possible missile launch, in the midst of worsening tensions in inter-Korean relations, are blurring the prospect of an early meeting.

Since the inception of the Obama administration, Pyongyang has been closely watching every move by Washington on North Korea - including public statements by secretary of state Hilary Clinton before and during her trip to Asia and Bosworth's appointment as top North Korea policy officer.

The North Koreans have been inviting private Americans to Pyongyang to listen to what the new administration's approach would be like and at the same time to send a message to Washington. The recent visitors to Pyongyang include Selig Harrison, a veteran North Korea specialist; Seigfried Hecker, a well-known nuclear specialist; Stephen Bosworth, now the senior nuclear envoy.

Pyongyang's basic message is consistent: the DPRK will be ready to talk to the Obama administration whenever Washington is ready. Bosworth's discussion with North Korean interlocutors, shortly before his appointment, must have been helpful to understand Pyongyang's latest positions. It would not be a surprise if Bosworth had known about his appointment before he went to Pyongyang. Upon his return from Pyongyang (Feb 7), he said the North Koreans kept "an upbeat tone" regarding the nuclear talks with the United States. Bosworth was quoted as saying, "We can continue to work towards eventual denuclearization of the Korean peninsula."

Earlier Kim Jong Il told the visiting Chinese Communist Party international director that he was committed to the elimination of nuclear weapons from the peninsula. (Jan 23). During a subsequent visit to Pyongyang by China's vice foreign minister, it was also confirmed that the North would be ready to return to the Beijing talks, as it regards the missile issue is a separate issue from denuclearization. (Feb 26).

North Korea usually reacts quickly to any statement from Washington that criticizes its leadership system or rejects its position on denuclearization. For example, when Secretary Clinton told the Senate panel for her confirmation hearing that normalization "will not be possible without the complete and verifiable elimination of North Korea's weapons programs," (Jan 13) the DPRK's foreign ministry immediately issued a statement insisting that Pyongyang was seeking "denuclearization through normalization," not the other way around.

In contrast to Condoleezza Rice, who called North Korea an "outpost of tyranny" in her confirmation hearing four years earlier, Clinton had not made any disturbing remark to the North Korean ear until she was in South Korea. Secretary Clinton's mention of a possible succession crisis in the North was made off the cuff, but her reference to the DPRK as a "tyranny" was in her prepared statement. (Feb 20).

Her remarks seemed to signal an open style of diplomacy rather than a new strategy. She reassured that the United States will work closely with South Korea on the North, with a warning: "North Korea is not going to get a different relationship with the United States while insulting and refusing dialogue with the Republic of Korea." Then she announced Bosworth's appointment as she planned. She made clear that the United States will deal with the government of Kim Jong Il, when she continued with her planned discussion of the certainties of the North Korean situation.

There was no negative reaction from Pyongyang. The Chosun Shinbo, a pro-North Korean paper in Tokyo, published a rarely objective analysis of Clinton's Asia visit. (Feb 23). Suggesting that Pyongyang watched every word spoken by the secretary, the paper said she was speaking to several audiences, including the audiences in the North, the South and the United States. The paper never mentioned Clinton's discussion of a succession crisis, which had drawn so much media attention.

Washington's bargaining chips are centered on Pyongyang's interest in normalization, a peace treaty, further lifting of sanctions and economic incentives, whereas full benefits to the North would not be delivered without normalized relations. In this context it is interesting to note some nuanced differences in Clinton's statements for the timing and conditions of normalization.

Speaking at the Asia Society she said, "If North Korea is genuinely prepared to completely and verifiably eliminate their nuclear weapons programs, the Obama administration will be willing to normalize bilateral relations." (Feb 13). This statement can be interpreted as a message that normalization could precede denuclearization, a reversal of the order from her January speech at the Asia Society.

Then in an interview with Korean journalists (Feb 20), she said, "If the North Koreans completely and verifiably eliminate their nuclear weapons programs, then we would consider normalizing our relations with them, seeking to sign a peace treaty..." This statement was closer to her earlier statement at the Senate hearing.

Despite these contrasting semantic subtleties, her clear and consistent message was: the Obama administration is seeking a "complete and verifiable" denuclearization - meaning a final settlement should get rid of all North Korea's nuclear programs, including uranium enrichment and proliferation activities, in a transparent manner.

The North Koreans must also have noticed some inadvertent factual mistakes that the U.S. secretary of state made. The secretary said North Korea has "no prime minister," "South Korea basically keeps the North Korean economy going with all of the subsidies of food and fuel..." and "the dismantlement of the facility at Yongbyon is nearly done." (Feb 20).

North Korea has a prime minister heading its cabinet, South Korea stopped providing food and other economic aid except for the operation of the Gaesung Industrial Park, and it is hard to say that the South keeps the North Korean economy going today. "Dismantlement" is supposed to be undertaken at the next stage, if negotiations succeed, after the "disablement" phase that is nearly completed.

But the North Koreans should understand that Hilary Clinton is a national political leader who could have been elected to the presidency. The secretary seems to share a balanced view of North Korea with Ambassador Bosworth, whom she and President Obama will depend on in dealing with the North Korean issue. They all understand their North Korea policy cannot succeed without the support of the American people at home and the cooperation of the U.S. allies and partners in the region.

As the North Koreans rewrite their talking points for future meetings, it is important for them to refrain from creating new problems either by launching a missile or even a satellite at this point or by making new unreasonable demands. Now the ball is back in Pyongyang's court to join international efforts to move the denuclearization process forward, and to seek its own interest of security assurance and economic development.

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
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