


Policy Forum 05-14A: North Korea's Tactics

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Leon V. Sigal

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by Leon V. Sigal](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

I. Introduction

Leon V. Sigal, director of the Northeast Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council in New York and author of "*Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*", writes: "North Korea is the embodiment of evil to some Americans, who object to making a pact with the devil. Why they prefer to bluff and bluster while watching North Korea adds to its nuclear might instead of disarming it through give-and-take is a mystery of their faith."

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II. Essay by Leon V. Sigal

- "North Korea's Tactics"
by Leon V. Sigal

North Korea sold uranium in gaseous form to Libya in 2002, US officials just told Japan, South Korea, and China. Worse yet, the North is now publicly claiming what US intelligence long suspected -- that it has the bomb. If so, these developments make it all the more imperative to resume negotiations. That will require Washington to tell Pyongyang directly and authoritatively the steps it is prepared to take to end enmity if the North eliminates its nuclear weapons programs.

Instead, the Bush administration is urging China to put pressure on the North to accept its current negotiating position in six-party talks. That is a waste of time. Knowing Pyongyang will not do something for nothing, Beijing is not about to press it until Washington puts a more equitable offer on the table.

The latest turn in the nuclear crisis came after experts at the Oak Ridge laboratory reportedly concluded that uranium gas found in Libya came from North Korea. If so, that could put the North a step closer to enriching uranium, an explosive ingredient in nuclear weapons.

A North Korean mine may have been the source of the suspect uranium. To be suitable for enrichment, however, that uranium has to be converted into a gas, uranium hexafluoride, which is then spun in centrifuges to separate out the U-235 used to power nuclear reactors or bombs.

Even if it made the uranium gas, North Korea is still years away from manufacturing enough centrifuges to mass-produce highly enriched uranium for bombs, according to US intelligence. That allows the time it will take to negotiate a detailed agreement to eliminate the North's enrichment program verifiably.

Much more urgently, a North Korean reactor is now generating plutonium for nuclear weapons. Pyongyang also says it completed reprocessing plutonium that it removed from that reactor in 1994. While the administration has been dithering, North Korea could be making five or six more nuclear weapons out of that plutonium.

What makes the administration's delay in dealing difficult to fathom is that in the latest round of six-party talks, North Korea said it was ready to halt its plutonium program as a first step to dismantling it. As part of its freeze, it would place the 1994 plutonium under international inspection. But it is unlikely to turn over any weapons it may have until after the United States improves relations fundamentally.

Does Pyongyang mean what it says? The surest way to find out is sustained diplomatic give-and-take.

Pyongyang isn't asking for much. It wants to exchange "words for words" and "action for action." It wants Washington to commit now to normalize relations and give it written assurances not to attack it, impede its economic development, or overthrow its government. It also wants the United States to join Japan and South Korea in resuming shipments of heavy fuel oil promised under the 1994 Agreed Framework, take it off the list of state sponsors of terrorism, and relax related sanctions.

This underscores Pyongyang's basic stance that if Washington remains its foe, it feels threatened

and will seek nuclear arms to counter that threat, but if Washington ends enmity, it says it will not.

Agreeing to normalize relations and provide written security assurances makes sense if North Korea agrees to freeze and eliminate any nuclear programs it has. That means not only plutonium reprocessing but also uranium enrichment, something it has not yet agreed to do. The details of a verifiable elimination of enrichment could be worked out in the future.

North Korea began acquiring the means to enrich uranium from Pakistan in 1998 after the Clinton administration failed to live up to its commitments in the 1994 Agreed Framework.

Pyongyang's tactics convinced many in Washington it was determined to arm and should be punished for brazenly breaking its commitments. It was not. Instead, it was playing tit for tat -- cooperating whenever Washington cooperated and retaliating when Washington reneged, in an effort to end hostile relations. It still is.

North Korea is the embodiment of evil to some Americans, who object to making a pact with the devil. Why they prefer to bluff and bluster while watching North Korea adds to its nuclear might instead of disarming it through give-and-take is a mystery of their faith.

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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[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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