

# Policy Forum 08-092: Obama and North Korea: The Road Ahead



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# Obama and North Korea: The Road Ahead

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Obama and North Korea: The Road Ahead

By Peter M. Beck

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## I. Introduction

Peter M. Beck, Professor at American University in Washington, D.C. and Yonsei University in Seoul, notes "several suggestions that would greatly increase the chances of successful negotiations" with the DPRK including insisting "that any deal reached between Pyongyang and Washington incorporates improved North-South relations... If the North follows through with its threat to close

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border crossings between the two Koreas, it would completely undo the rapprochement of the past decade. Washington should make it clear that this is unacceptable."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

## **II. Article by Peter M. Beck**

- "Obama and North Korea: The Road Ahead"

By Peter M. Beck

As if reversing a global economic meltdown and cleaning up after two botched wars were not daunting enough, President-elect Barack Obama will also confront a nuclear-armed North Korea that's more dangerous than ever. At the same time, US allies South Korea and Japan worry that Obama will rush to cut a deal with the North that leaves them out of the loop. Achieving a lasting breakthrough that eluded Obama's predecessors will be more difficult than ever, but the opportunity is there for those who have absorbed the lessons of the past 15 years.

Through a combination of Bush blunders and North Korean deceit, the Gordian Knot of nuclear standoff has grown tighter. Under President Bush, the North most likely doubled its stock of weapons-grade plutonium and dispersed it; furthered its uranium enrichment program; increased missile capabilities; and proliferated portions of its nuclear program to Syria. Only after Pyongyang tested a nuclear device in fall 2006 did the Bush administration engage in bilateral negotiations. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill deserves kudos for halting the downward spiral and achieving partial dismantlement of the North's main nuclear facilities, but the heavy diplomatic lifting has only just begun. Based on the eight-stage negotiating model I helped develop for the International Crisis Group four years ago (available at [www.icg.org](http://www.icg.org) ), we're at the start of Phase Three.

Given the prominent role that former Clintonites already play in Obama's transition team, it's not unreasonable to surmise that he'll follow in Bill Clinton's footsteps and engage in vigorous negotiations with the North. But if Chairman Kim Jong-il assumes that America's new president will go to Pyongyang at the drop of a hat to fulfill a campaign promise to talk to the world's dictators, he's in for a surprise. Under a best-case scenario, future negotiations will be long and difficult.

With the plethora of challenges Obama faces both at home and abroad, it would be easy to fall into the benign neglect mode that frequently characterized Clinton's North Korea policy. Over the years, the North has learned that nothing concentrates Washington minds more effectively than provocative behavior. I have little doubt about the North's willingness to fulfill Vice President-elect Joseph Biden's prediction that the next president will face a diplomatic crisis during his first months in office. One cannot rule out a second nuclear test given the underwhelming nature of the North's first one.

The best predictor we have for determining the extent to which President Obama will engage the North is the selection of his Korea team, especially his choice of secretary of state. If he had selected New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, we could have expected stepped-up negotiations. A Secretary Richardson would most likely visit Pyongyang sooner rather than later. Meanwhile, if the rumors are true that Senator Hillary Clinton will receive the nod, given her criticism of Obama's willingness to talk to dictators, we can expect more continuity with the current Bush approach of on-again off-again negotiations. However, she would be able to deploy husband Bill to serve as a special envoy to keep the talks on track and facilitate a breakthrough.

Much of what's been accomplished over the past two years is due in no small part to the dynamic and indefatigable Christopher Hill. Thus, it's vital to form a capable Korea team to actually undertake the negotiations. The new point person for this team must be backed by a National Security Council Asia director who's knowledgeable about North Korea.

However, even if the Obama administration can come up with a "dream team" to guide policy, there are at least two major obstacles to achieving a breakthrough - one in Seoul and one in Pyongyang. The United States and South Korea have only had likeminded leaders for four of the past 16 years, making policy coordination inherently problematic. Once again, our two political pendulums have swung in opposite directions, yielding heads of state and legislatures that will govern for the next four years from opposite ends of the political spectrum. President Lee Myung-bak has professed his support for stepped-up engagement by Washington, but given the deep-freeze in North-South relations, anxieties will run high if it appears the US is ready to cut a deal with the North. The 1993-4 negotiations often resembled a romantic love triangle soap opera.

The second obstacle could prove more formidable. Based on the number of European doctors accumulating frequent flyer miles on Air Koryo of late, it's fairly safe to assume that Kim Jong-il has experienced major health problems. Pyongyang may indeed have begun the transition from bedside to graveside rule. Determining who's in and who's out of a new ruling junta will likely take months or even years given the absence of an anointed successor. Negotiations with the North could continue in 1994 even after the sudden death of Kim Il-sung precisely because a longstanding succession plan was in place. Unless his son recovers or issues clear instructions, a junta will likely focus on consolidating its power and maintaining an iron grip on the country.

While the challenges are great, here are five suggestions that would greatly increase the chances of successful negotiations with the North:

- Release the North's June 2008 nuclear declaration and the ensuing verification protocol. Without these documents, it's impossible to determine how close the US is to a meaningful breakthrough.
- Embrace the six-party talks. While the talks themselves have been sporadic and the real breakthroughs have come from bilateral negotiations, they have helped stabilize the crisis and facilitate coordination among the regional players. As North Korea's most important lifeline, Beijing plays a vital role as facilitator and occasional arm-twister. As the party that will ultimately foot the bill if a breakthrough occurs, Seoul having a seat at the table reduces angst and provides a sense of ownership.
- Appoint a special envoy to manage the negotiations rather than have the assistant secretary of state for Asia in charge. Managing intra- and inter-agency coordination as well as frequent visits to the other five parties is too great a burden to place on the shoulders of an official in charge of managing relations with all of Asia.
- Revive the Trilateral Cooperation and Oversight Group launched under Clinton to improve communication between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul. Presidents Bush and Roh Moo-hyun allowed these talks to atrophy. Yet, improved coordination is more needed than ever. Seoul's anxieties are exceeded only by Tokyo's sense of betrayal by Bush after having pledged to abductees' family members that their demands for a full accounting would be heeded before any breakthroughs were made.
- Insist that any deal reached between Pyongyang and Washington incorporates improved North-South relations. The mixed signals sent by the Lee Myung-bak administration gave Pyongyang the pretext to shift from "Koreans only," *minjok kkiri*, to a policy of embracing the US and excluding the South, or *tongmi bongnam*. If the North follows through with its threat to close border crossings between the two Koreas, it would completely undo the rapprochement of the past

decade. Washington should make it clear that this is unacceptable.

Even if the Obama administration decides to step up negotiations with the North, the road ahead will be bumpy. Washington must make the North an offer it cannot refuse.

### **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](mailto: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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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

[nautilus@nautilus.org](mailto:nautilus@nautilus.org)