

Policy Forum 09-008: Obama Will Be Challenged by North Korea



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Obama Will Be Challenged by North Korea

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By Bruce Klingner

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I. Introduction

Bruce Klingner, Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia in the Asian Studies Center at the Heritage Foundation, writes, "As President Obama contemplates the Sisyphean task of making real progress in North Korean denuclearization, he should first insist that North Korea comply with its existing six-party talks agreements. These include: issuing a data declaration addressing its uranium weapons program and proliferation activities; disabling all nuclear facilities; and accepting a

verification protocol that meets international standards."

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II. Article by Bruce Klingner

- "Obama Will Be Challenged by North Korea"

By Bruce Klingner

Of all the foreign policy challenges that Barack Obama inherits from President George Bush, North Korea may prove to be the most intractable. Perceptions that Obama will take a dramatically different approach toward Pyongyang, including an embrace of summit diplomacy, have raised unrealistic expectations for a near-term breakthrough in the six-party talks.

Similarly, many in South Korea interpreted North Korea's abstention from criticizing the United States in its authoritative New Year's Day editorial as a sure signal that Pyongyang was reaching out to Washington.

In the dawn of a new year and a new U.S. administration, we can again be hopeful of a diplomatic solution to the North Korean nuclear problem.

Neither the confrontational approach of the first six years of the Bush administration nor the unconditional engagement strategy of the final two years of Bush and the Roh Moo-hyun administration achieved success.

But a U.S. policy that integrates a comprehensive diplomatic approach with accompanying pressure derived from enforcing international law and U.N. resolutions may prove successful, particularly if closely coordinated with our allies South Korea and Japan.

Still, prudence demands that we remember the broken promises and shattered dreams that litter the Korean landscape. Nuclear negotiations are stalemated because North Korea rejects a verification protocol that the Bush administration claimed Pyongyang had previously accepted. And Pyongyang's response ? the vitriolic attacks and near severing of relations ? when South Korea and Japan demanded conditionality and reciprocity bodes ill for those hoping North Korea will accept future requirements arising from the six-party talks.

Of course, Obama's North Korea policy will remain dependent on a modicum of cooperation by Kim Jong-il. Although Pyongyang welcomed Obama's election, it will await the details of his policies prior to revealing its strategy toward the new U.S. administration.

North Korea has shown itself to be patient during leadership transitions, parsing the selection of administration officials and their statements for indications of potential policy changes.

North Korea first seeks to attain its goals through formal and informal diplomatic means, manipulating multiple parallel channels of engagement, playing one opponent off against the other to gain negotiating leverage.

But, if North Korea feels it is too long ignored or faces a less benign negotiating environment, it will initiate a carefully calibrated ratcheting up of tensions.

Pyongyang typically signals intent to engage in provocative behavior by increasing the bellicosity

and authoritativeness of its official propaganda. Potential options include prohibited actions in the Joint Security Area; extensive out-of-cycle military training exercises near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) or naval incursions in the West Sea; a long-range missile test; or preparations for a second nuclear test.

North Korea believes it can and should engage in provocative behavior because it has felt no lasting punitive repercussions dating back to 1968, when it seized a U.S. naval ship and tried to assassinate the South Korean President. Even Pyongyang's nuclear test in 2006 produced only a brief interruption in the six-party talks. Negotiations quickly resumed, not only dissipating the international resolve to punish North Korea, but ultimately bestowing economic and diplomatic benefits on Pyongyang.

As President Obama assembles his foreign policy-making team and translates vague campaign pronouncements to specific policy recommendations, he should look to history for guidance. And history clearly advises that he avoids several of the current recommendations. Specifically, he should not:

- Double down on a losing hand. The limited action-for-action strategy of the six-party talks has failed, so some advocate broadening the scope of negotiations to offer North Korea an even larger deal. That's akin to urging a farmer who's lost every hand of poker against a wily dealer to go all in and bet his homestead in hopes of winning it all back - and more - on one hand.
- Put the cart before the horse. Since Kim Jong-il makes all-important decisions, some believe that the United States should propose a summit meeting to avoid months of haggling by lower-level officials. This wishful thinking recalls the Clinton administration, when a senior official stated, "If only we could get the president in the same room as Kim Jong-il, the force of Bill's personality is so strong that we'd get all of our objectives!"
- Provide concessions to undermine North Korean hardliners. North Korean intransigence has been depicted as a short-term manifestation of a hard-line faction. In this unlikely scenario, Kim is really a closet capitalist who has somehow fallen under the influence of evil Korean "neocons." This comes in spite of ample evidence that Kim rules with an iron fist and tolerates no dissension. North Korean negotiators, like used-car salesmen, are always happy to promise to "work with you." Provided you cough up "just a few more" concessions to convince Kim that they've reached a good deal.
- Use creative ambiguity to maintain "progress" in negotiations. The Clinton and Bush administrations both ran into trouble when they acquiesced to North Korean demands for vague text rather than agreements that clearly delineate requirements and timelines. Deferring rather than resolving issues provides a false sense of advancement but allows Pyongyang to exploit loopholes and avoid its denuclearization commitments.

As President Obama contemplates the Sisyphean task of making real progress in North Korean denuclearization, he should first insist that North Korea comply with its existing six-party talks agreements. These include: issuing a data declaration addressing its uranium weapons program and proliferation activities; disabling all nuclear facilities; and accepting a verification protocol that meets international standards. Next, he should require more detailed follow-on, joint statements to prevent North Korea from exploiting loopholes to avoid full compliance. He should also consider establishing deadlines so Pyongyang is not allowed to drag out the six-party talks indefinitely so that it achieves de facto international acceptance as a nuclear weapons state.

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