


Policy Forum 09-034: Old Ideas and New Diplomats: a Fresh Beginning in Northeast Asia?

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Old Ideas and New Diplomats: a Fresh Beginning in Northeast Asia?

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By James Goodby and Markku Heiskanen

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I. Introduction

James Goodby, former U.S. Ambassador to Finland and a Research Fellow at Stanford University's

Hoover Institution, and Markku Heiskanen, Senior Fellow at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in Copenhagen, write, "It is clear is that only a comprehensive approach to the security problems of Northeast Asia will really get at the basic issues... By expressing a willingness to negotiate other military, political and economic issues together with the nuclear issue, the U.S. can significantly improve the political conditions for the negotiations."

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 James Goodby and Markku Heiskanen

- "Old Ideas and New Diplomats: a Fresh Beginning in Northeast Asia?"

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Hillary Clinton made her first trip abroad as U.S. Secretary of State. It was almost unprecedented for a Secretary to travel first to Asia. Of her predecessors only Dean Rusk had made his first trip to Asia in the 1960s. As she said, it was not by chance. Asia's growing importance on the world scene required it and a serious international security problem in Northeast Asia needs immediate attention.

Despite its being over-shadowed by other matters, the economic crisis, in particular, North Korea and its nuclear program, now dramatized by the recent rocket-launch, is one of the most crucial challenges the Obama administration faces.

A strategy for dealing with this challenge should include a peace treaty to replace the 1953 Armistice agreement, actions to normalize U.S.-North Korea relations, and a variety of steps to enhance security in a denuclearized Korean Peninsula. Obama administration's support for the ongoing multilateral Six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear weapons program, started under the Bush administration in 2003, was initially a question-mark but is no longer. Secretary Clinton has made clear that the administration will not try to change course.

Relations between North and South Korea are at their lowest ebb in many years. South Korea, now led by a conservative government, after several years of liberal conciliatory governments, has pulled back from the cooperative stance of its predecessors. North Korea has reacted - and over-reacted - in the view of many observers, who attribute this to uncertainties injected into the North Korean political scene by the still unexplained illness of Kim Jong Il a few months ago.

In Seoul Secretary Clinton heartily endorsed the use of the Six-party Talks to resolve the issue of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. She, of course, stood by America's South Korean ally and asked North Korea to adopt a more moderate stance. She has promised a peace treaty with North Korea and economic and energy assistance to North Korea if Kim Jong Il renounces his nuclear weapons program. She also announced the appointment of a new special envoy for North Korea.

In China Secretary Clinton discussed the North Korean problem with senior Chinese leaders. China has been chairing the Six-party Talks since their inception. China's concern is not just to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula but to do so while stabilizing the shaky North Korean economy. Collapse and chaos in the North is not what China wants, not should anyone. So Secretary Clinton has to calculate how tough to be with North Korea, given that China has limits on toughness towards its prickly neighbor.

The Six-party Talks could become a comprehensive multilateral forum. The relevance of CSCE/OSCE

experience to the emerging Northeast Asian security and cooperation architecture was studied at an international seminar organized by the Austrian Center for International Studies (ACIS), and hosted by the Finnish Embassy in Washington last October.

The seminar came to the conclusion that there is an important body of relevant European experience on multilateral confidence building and security cooperation that might be drawn upon by Northeast Asian countries. The CSCE/OSCE experience is considered especially relevant, in particular the process leading up to the Helsinki Final Act (1969-75).

The North Korea strategy of the Obama administration is very similar to that of the Bush administration thus far. Will it work any better? Two factors suggest that it may. First, the Obama team is building on a fairly solid foundation laid by the last two years of the Bush administration. They did not tear down all their predecessors had accomplished in order to start over again. Second, the Obama administration seems to be more unified on this issue than the Bush administration was. That administration was divided between "regime changers" led by Vice President Cheney and "engagers" led by the State Department, occasionally encouraged by President Bush in his last years in office.

Whether the negotiating conditions will remain as favorable as they were during parts of the Bush years is a different matter. There are those who think that military hard-liners are now dominating policy in North Korea. The recent rocket-launch seems to strengthen this view. And Pyongyang appears to be well dug in against adequate verification of the dismantling of its nuclear weapons programs, particularly its disputed uranium enrichment program.

It is clear is that only a comprehensive approach to the security problems of Northeast Asia will really get at the basic issues. So far Secretary Clinton has revealed only a little of her thinking on that. By expressing a willingness to negotiate other military, political and economic issues together with the nuclear issue, the U.S. can significantly improve the political conditions for the negotiations. The history of negotiating with North Korea demonstrates that improvements in political conditions almost always precede and foster agreements on security-related issues. But the scope of a settlement should extend beyond Korea. The goal should be a new security architecture, not only on the Korean Peninsula, but in the whole region of Northeast Asia.

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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