

Policy Forum 08-086A: Setting a New Course with North Korea

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Setting a New Course with North Korea

By K.A. Namkung and Leon V. Sigal

CONTENTS

- [I. Introduction](#)
- [II. Article by K.A. Namkung and Leon V. Sigal](#)
- [III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

I. Introduction

K.A. Namkung, Foreign Policy Adviser to New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, and Leon V. Sigal, Director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council, write, "getting North Korea to reverse course now will not be easy, but a comprehensive approach is needed if the next administration is to give Pyongyang more of a stake in keeping deals. It also would give Washington its first real leverage: U.S. steps could be withheld if - and only if - Pyongyang does not follow through on its commitments."

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II. Article by K.A. Namkung and Leon V. Sigal

- "Setting a New Course with North Korea"
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North Korean agreement to resume disabling its plutonium program and allow verification of its plutonium production in return for being delisted as a state sponsor of terrorism is welcome news.

Yet the deal once again prompts a troubling question: How can Washington avoid reacting under pressure from Pyongyang, especially when the process of denuclearization could take years to complete? Moreover, now that Kim Jong-il's health is at issue, why take chances that his successor might be less able to keep anuclear deal or control North Korea's nuclear weapons and material?

The answer to both questions is for Washington to put a bigger deal on the negotiating table now.

Instead of the incremental approach taken so far, the new U.S. president needs to propose a comprehensive menu of sequenced actions toward a fundamentally new relationship with North Korea - political, economic and strategic. In return, Pyongyang needs to agree to satisfy international norms of behavior, starting with steps to stop exporting nuclear technology and eliminate its nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs. It also needs to welcome full people-to-people relations signifying its willingness to join the rest of the world.

Pyongyang's position is that as long as Washington remains its foe, it feels threatened and will acquire nuclear weapons and missiles to counter that threat. But, it says, if Washington ends enmity, it will no longer feel threatened and can get rid of these weapons. Whether it means what it says is far from certain, but the only way to find out is to build mutual trust over time by faithfully carrying out a series of reciprocal steps.

Yet the step-by-step approach has failed to build much trust or give either side much of a stake in any agreement, leaving Pyongyang free to use its nuclear leverage. And use that leverage it did: Whenever the United States failed to keep its side of the bargain, North Korea was all too quick to retaliate - in 1998 by seeking the means to enrich uranium and testing a longer-range Taepodong missile, in 2003 by reigniting its plutonium program and giving nuclear help to Syria, in 2006 by test-launching the Taepodong and other missiles and conducting a nuclear test, and most recently by suspending the disabling of its Yongbyon facilities and threatening to resume production of plutonium.

Getting North Korea to reverse course now will not be easy, but a comprehensive approach is needed if the next administration is to give Pyongyang more of a stake in keeping deals. It also would give Washington its first real leverage: U.S. steps could be withheld if - and only if - Pyongyang does not follow through on its commitments.

The proposal would spell out the following quid pro quos:

- Complete the disabling of the plutonium facilities in return for shipment of remaining energy assistance.
- As inducement to agreement on dismantlement, begin a peace process on the Korean peninsula with a declaration signed by the United States and North Korea, along with South Korea and China. In it Washington would reaffirm it has no hostile intent toward Pyongyang and

formally commit itself to signing a peace treaty ending the Korean War when North Korea is nuclear-free.

It would then commence negotiating a series of peace agreements on confidence-building measures such as an "open-skies" arrangement to allow reconnaissance flights across the DMZ that would reduce the likelihood of inadvertent clashes like the 1996 shooting down of a U.S. reconnaissance helicopter that strayed across the DMZ or incursions by North Korean spy submarines.

- The opening of a U.S. embassy in Pyongyang has been delayed for too long, impairing U.S. ability to know what is going on there. Move to establish full diplomatic relations as Pyongyang dismantles its fuel fabrication plant, reprocessing facility and reactor at Yongbyon, carries out the verification of its plutonium production, adopts a plan for verification of its enrichment and proliferation activities, and engages in discussions with the United Nations on human rights progress such as allowing free exercise of religion and opening its political prisons to Red Cross scrutiny.
- Hold a summit meeting with North Korea's leader in return for its disposal of spent nuclear fuel removed during the disabling process and any new fuel rods it has.
- Deepen economic engagement with agricultural and infrastructure aid through international financial institutions, begin building conventional power plants as North Korea dismantles its nuclear programs and begins to turn over its nuclear material and weapons.
- Complete power plants, perhaps including replacement nuclear reactors, and sign a peace treaty once the North gives up all its nuclear material and weapons.

By getting Kim Jong-il's signature on such a deal, the next president would give Pyongyang a tangible stake in becoming nuclear-free - and give Washington its first real leverage over the outcome.

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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