


Policy Forum 10-030A: Don't Sink Diplomacy

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Recommended Citation

Joel S. Wit, "Policy Forum 10-030A: Don't Sink Diplomacy", NAPSNet Policy Forum, May 27, 2010, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/policy-forum-10-030a-dont-sink-diplomacy/>

May 27th, 2010

By Joel S. Wit

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Article by Joel S. Wit](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

I. Introduction

Joel S. Wit, visiting scholar at the U.S.-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University and the founder of its Web site 38north.org, writes, "In the aftermath of the Cheonan sinking, the United States and South Korea must recognize that a return to dialogue would serve our interests. It is the only realistic way to rein in North Korea's objectionable activities."

This article was originally published by 38 North: <http://38north.org>

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views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Joel S. Wit

- "Don't Sink Diplomacy"

By Joel S. Wit

In 1998, I led a team of American government experts to an underground installation to determine if North Korea was cheating on a 1994 agreement to eliminate its nuclear weapons program. Pyongyang had recently tested a long-range missile, and relations were tense.

For a week, we passed barking guard dogs and shouting soldiers doing their synchronized morning exercises to wander through a maze of tunnels. Once, when a team member violated the rules for the inspection (by sketching some of the buildings) we were locked in a room surrounded by troops with bayonets drawn while I argued for hours with the base commander. When we were finally allowed to leave, a van equipped with loudspeakers blasted anti-American slogans at our bus.

Nevertheless, we were able to complete our investigation, which found no nuclear activities, because Pyongyang had a stake in maintaining a relationship with us: the North Koreans were expecting William Perry, the former defense secretary and the first presidential envoy to visit their country. Mr. Perry would pave the way for President Bill Clinton to meet a top-ranking North Korean official in Washington.

In the 16 years I have worked with North Korea, I have made 18 trips there, and I remain convinced that sustained diplomatic engagement is the only way to encourage the North to moderate its threatening behavior. The alternative is far worse: an isolated North Korea that is heading down a path of defiance.

This lesson has been forgotten. When President Obama took office he pledged to engage rogue states in dialogue, but he didn't follow through with North Korea. Confronted by its provocative nuclear and missile tests, he secured international sanctions, stepped up cooperation with South Korea and Japan and even garnered some support from China, the North's closest friend. All that made sense as far as it went.

But then American officials neglected to re-engage Pyongyang. Instead of using last summer's extraordinary meeting between former President Clinton and Kim Jong-il to jump-start dialogue, they lashed themselves to a set of hard and fast preconditions for talks, demanding that Pyongyang pledge to give up its nuclear arsenal and return to multilateral nuclear negotiations. Last December, Ambassador Stephen Bosworth was sent to North Korea to keep communications open, but his visit was wasted as Washington spent months debating about whether to hold another meeting.

As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton travels to Asia next week, amid reports that a South Korean investigation has found the North responsible for sinking the South's warship Cheonan, the administration persists in playing a waiting game - Mrs. Clinton calls it "strategic patience" - based on the assumption that time is on our side. The more Pyongyang is plagued by political instability, food shortages and a declining economy, the theory goes, the more likely it will be to yield to American demands.

Yet Kim Jong-il remains in control. Food shortages exist, but harvests from the past two years have been relatively good. Industrial production grew last year and, thanks to ties with China, trade declined only slightly. And the North believes its nuclear security blanket makes it less vulnerable to American threats.

Officials in Pyongyang who have hard-line tendencies welcome American strategic patience. It enables North Korea to keep its nuclear weapons, build new ones and export dangerous technologies. (The Internet makes exporting a bomb design as easy as pressing the send button.)

The Cheonan sinking makes clear the dangers of playing a waiting game. The sinking - probably the North's effort to retaliate for past clashes and to humiliate the conservative South Korean president, Lee Myung-bak - shows how unwise it is to leave stability on the peninsula hostage to Pyongyang's goodwill.

What should the Obama administration do instead? Since Mr. Kim has said publicly that he is open to talks, the United States should do nothing to shut what may be a window of opportunity. Now that North Korea has been found responsible for the Cheonan sinking, Seoul will demand - and the United States should support - punishing Pyongyang.

But the Cheonan sinking also provides an opportunity for the Obama administration to shift its approach to North Korea. Now, we should avoid steps that might lead to a major escalation of tensions. One reasonable response would be to seek condemnation by the United Nations Security Council, while expanding military defenses against the North and strengthening cooperation with Japan.

And instead of demanding new preconditions for talks - an apology for the Cheonan, for example - we should mount a gradual pragmatic effort to engage in new discussions, not as a reward for bad behavior or to talk for the sake of talking, but to make us more secure.

We should not delude ourselves into thinking that Kim Jong-il will soon give up his nuclear arsenal, even for financial rewards; it is too important to his vision of a strong North Korea.

But Mr. Kim's vision is not set in concrete. While growing political and economic ties with China have benefited the North, he is probably uncomfortable with his country's increasing dependence on Beijing. Concerned about inter-Korean tensions and about a nuclear-armed North, China would also be supportive.

So a serious initiative to build better relations could eventually make headway. And it is very possible that, as relations improve, the North Koreans may be persuaded to accept a step-by-step process of increasingly tight, verifiable controls on their nuclear program, and on their dangerous exports.

While this process would not eliminate all of North Korea's nuclear weapons right away, as trust is restored, the North may reach a point where it no longer sees them as vital to its national security. But our immediate focus should be on the journey toward denuclearization, not on the final destination.

Negotiations with North Korea can be frustrating, but dialogue can work. It worked in 1994, when intelligence suggested that an unconstrained North could have bomb-making material for almost 100 nuclear weapons by 2000. The agreement reached months later prevented that. By the time that accord collapsed, in 2002, the North had enough material for only six weapons. Even limited success is better than none at all.

In the aftermath of the Cheonan sinking, the United States and South Korea must recognize that a return to dialogue would serve our interests. It is the only realistic way to rein in North Korea's objectionable activities.

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development

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[Return to top](#)

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