Policy Forum 11-18: Preventing a Nuclear North Korea

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Preventing a Nuclear North Korea

By Leon V. Sigal

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Nautilus invites your contributions to this forum, including any responses to this report.

CONTENTS

I. Introduction

II. Article by Leon V. Sigal

III. Nautilus invites your responses



I. Introduction

Leon V. Sigal, Director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council, writes “Pyongyang is ready to negotiate with Seoul to ship out the fuel rods needed to restart its nuclear reactor in return for energy aid. It seems willing to abide by a moratorium on missile tests, and possibly nuclear tests, once talks with Washington resume. And it has said it will negotiate on suspending its uranium enrichment…What are Washington and Seoul waiting for—more trouble? ”

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II. Article by Leon V. Sigal

- Preventing a Nuclear North Korea
By Leon V. Sigal

If engagement with North Korea has been difficult over the past two decades, disengagement has been disastrous. In the absence of negotiations, Pyongyang has taken steps to improve its nuclear and missile capabilities—or worse.

The conventional wisdom in Washington is that Barack Obama held out his hand to Kim Jong-il only to have it slapped away. The reality is more complicated.
Instead of resuming talks with North Korea, the administration moved to improve ties with South Korea, where President Lee Myung-bak was determined to isolate and pressure Pyongyang in hopes of making it more pliable in negotiations, if not cause its collapse.
The U.S. embassy in Seoul warned Washington of Lee’s “tougher approach” in a January 29, 2009 cable disclosed by WikiLeaks: President Lee . . . is prepared leave the inter-Korean relations frozen

until the end of his term in office, if necessary. It is also our assessment that Lee's more conservative advisors and supporters see the current standoff as a genuine opportunity to push and further weaken the North, even if this might involve considerable brinkmanship.

Lee had begun by backing away from a promising October 2007 summit agreement that committed the two Koreas to negotiate “a joint fishing area” in the contested waters of the West (Yellow) Sea and naval confidence-building measures “to avoid accidental clashes and turn it into a zone of peace.”

Lee’s renege triggered a war of words, then three deadly clashes. When a North Korean patrol boat crossed into the disputed waters on November 9, 2009, a South Korean naval vessel fired warning shots at it. The North returned fire and the South opened up, severely damaging the North’s ship and causing an unknown number of casualties—just what the 2007 summit accord had sought to forestall. On November 17, according to North Korean accounts, Kim Jong-il ordered the training of a “do-or-die unit of sea heroes” to avenge the attack. That order was carried out on March 26, 2010 with the torpedoing of a South Korea corvette, the Cheonan, killing 46, an attack for which Pyongyang has denied responsibility. When Seoul reacted by conducting live-fire exercises in the West Sea, the North retaliated with a November 23 artillery barrage on Yeonpyeong Island that killed four South Koreans, two of them civilians.

Seoul also moved to impede nuclear negotiations by undoing an October 2007 six-party agreement under which Pyongyang had pledged to provide “a complete and correct declaration of all its nuclear programs” and to disable its plutonium facilities at Yongbyon, pending their permanent dismantlement. In return, it was promised energy aid, an end to U.S. sanctions under the Trading with the Enemy Act and removal from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. The accord made no mention of verification, which was left to a later phase of negotiations.

Under pressure from Seoul, President Bush delayed the delisting and easing of sanctions until Pyongyang agreed to cooperate in verifying its nuclear declaration. Even after Pyongyang accepted arrangements which could have sufficed to ascertain how much plutonium it had extracted in the past, Seoul suspended delivery of promised fuel oil and Bush backed it.

On entering the White House, the Obama administration sustained this course. Its posture of “strategic patience” left its North Korea policy hostage to Seoul, which was doing its utmost to impede negotiations.

Pyongyang decided to force the action. In late January 2009, it began assembling a rocket. It tried to portray an April 5 test of the device as a peaceful attempt to put a satellite into orbit. Spurning a Security Council statement that condemned the launch and imposed sanctions, Pyongyang immediately began preparations for its second nuclear test, conducted on May 25. That led to additional U.N. and U.S. sanctions.

North Korea’s response was to reveal both a new missile and a uranium enrichment facility at Yongbyon, underscoring the futility of sanctions in curbing its nuclear activities. What it has yet to do is enrich substantial quantities of uranium, restart its Yongbyon reactor to generate more plutonium, or conduct the additional missile and nuclear tests it needs to develop its new deliverable warhead and more reliable missiles.

Inducing Pyongyang not to take these steps should begin promptly. That was the view of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who told reporters on a trip to Asia on January 11 that two things have changed the status quo in Korea: The first is, with the North Koreans’ continuing development of nuclear weapons, and their development of intercontinental ballistic missiles, North Korea is becoming a direct threat to the United States, and we have to take that into account. And the second is … clearly if there is another provocation, there will be pressure on the South Korean government to react—a diplomatic way of signaling U.S. military unhappiness with Seoul’s aggressive stance. Gates showed strategic impatience: *“We think there is some urgency to proceeding down the track of negotiations and engagement …*"

Pyongyang is ready to negotiate with Seoul to ship out the fuel rods needed to restart its nuclear reactor in return for energy aid. It seems willing to abide by a moratorium on missile tests, and

possibly nuclear tests, once talks with Washington resume. And it has said it will negotiate on suspending its uranium enrichment.
Seoul wants Pyongyang to apologize for sinking the Cheonan and attacking Yeonpyeong Island before entering into nuclear talks, but an apology won't prevent more attacks. Negotiating a peace treaty might. What are Washington and Seoul waiting for—more trouble?
III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@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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