

Policy Forum 05-57A: Reframing the US-DPRK Conflict

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By Erich Weingartner

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I. Introduction

Erich Weingartner, Editor-in-Chief, CanKor Virtual ThinkNet on Korean Peace and Security (www.cankor.ca), wrote: "Re-framing is not an escape from reality. It is a conscious effort to return to reality. It requires communication, dialogue, learning and teaching, refusing to walk away when the going gets tough, engaging without illusion for the purpose of influencing outcomes. These may

be viewed as very small steps, but this is a very long-term problem. And as we have learned from the six-party process, any step is better than no step at all."

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II. Essay by Erich Weingartner

- Reframing the US-DPRK Conflict
by Erich Weingartner

On the fifth anniversary of the North-South Korean Summit-or what DPR Koreans like to refer to as the "June 15th Joint Declaration"-many entertain doubts about the wisdom of ROK ex-President Kim Dae Jung's "sunshine policy." The sun is once again covered in clouds of conflict, more dangerous than at any time in the past 60 years.

The finger of blame is most often pointed at North Korea -with good reason. It is not easy to form a relationship with the DPRK, even when your objectives are purely humanitarian. Over the past few years much more has been learned about human rights violations, the existence of labor camps, and the continuing flow of defectors, refugees and migrants fleeing into China and South Korea for economic and political reasons. The DPRK quit the nuclear non-proliferation regime, restarted its Yongbyon nuclear reactor, reprocessed its spent fuel rods into weapons-grade plutonium, and recently declared itself a nuclear power.

But does the DPRK deserve all the blame? There is surely enough blame to share on all sides, not least the way the current Washington administration has handled what five years ago seemed an increasingly hopeful scenario. The six-party process that was intended to eliminate North Korea 's nuclear weapons programs has come to a standstill, with the USA demanding compliance to complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement before any real negotiations are to begin. Is anyone surprised that the DPRK has rejected this premise, demanding instead security guarantees and a step-by-step negotiated approach?

Security and peace cannot be achieved by playing the blame game. Even an introductory course in conflict resolution will identify this as a *power-based, adversarial contest* -one in which resources are used to coerce or intimidate the other side in order to get them to comply with your demands. This is a win-or-lose proposition. In game theory it is called a "tit-for-tat" challenge. There is no peaceful end to such a contest, unless one side capitulates. And that, as even President Bush must now realize, is not going to happen in Korea , even if you add bargaining with carrots and sticks.

Another approach is to turn the *power-based challenge* into a *rights-based challenge* . This is done by appealing to an external source of authority, like the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, or in worst cases, the UN Security Council. But a *rights-based contest* is still a win-los-contest, and in the end, someone has to apply force to make one of the parties comply.

Simply vanquishing the other side doesn't necessarily solve the problem, especially if you have to continue to live with the enemy. As we have learned from the war in Iraq , sometimes winners need happy losers. Peoples and nations that lose have a tendency to retaliate. Furthermore, the greater the intensity of interdependence, the greater is the need for mutually consensual solutions. Is anybody really surprised that South Koreans prefer a negotiated solution?

Negotiation is a tool to arrive at a solution that satisfies each disputant's interest. Each has to feel

that *their own* needs are met. Negotiation is an *interest-based, non-adversarial approach* that seeks to appeal to each side's enlightened self-interest. It seeks a reconciliation of those interests. This approach is often wrongly labeled "condoning, appeasing, or capitulating," or in George Bush's vocabulary, "rewarding bad behavior".

It is nothing of the sort. If anything, the current power-based approach used by the USA has rewarded the DPRK with a fully functioning, unverifiable nuclear weapons program-the exact opposite of what it was supposed to achieve.

What is necessary at this point is to *re-frame* the Korean conflict. A *frame* is the perception of a conflict situation that causes the perceiver to make assumptions and interpretations about what is true in the conflict and about what solutions are possible. Since so little information is available about North Korean facts, figures, actions and intentions, our *frame* becomes more important than *reality* .

Our assumptions lead us to use emotive trigger words such as "Stalinist, authoritarian, totalitarian, despotic, and tyrannical." These adjectives focus on negative perceptions of reality. A *frame* based on these perceptions inevitably leads to pessimism about the prospects of finding a solution. The shared interests that are so essential to negotiation become invisible. An adversarial *frame* tends to divert attention from one's own *real* interests by creating another interest, namely surviving or winning.

Isn't that what we have now in the six-party framework? The DPRK wants to survive, and the USA wants to win. The question that needs to be asked is, "What do we *really* want to happen on the Korean peninsula? What are our interests?" Questions like this require a "re-framing" of the conflict.

Re-Framing means changing one's perception of a conflict situation so as to see new possibilities about what may be true and about how it may be resolved.

We cannot choose the facts. They are what they are. It is the facts that make us feel helpless. But we *can* change our *frame* . However we choose to evaluate the "sunshine policy" five years later, it was a successful *re-framing* exercise that opened possibilities that were unthinkable before.

Civil society can play a vital role in *re-framing* the current conflict, especially now that the sun no longer shines. *Re-framing* is not an escape from reality. It is a conscious effort to return to reality. It requires communication, dialogue, learning and teaching, refusing to walk away when the going gets tough, engaging without illusion for the purpose of influencing outcomes. These may be viewed as very small steps, but this is a very long-term problem. And as we have learned from the six-party process, *any* step is better than *no* step at all.

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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