

# Policy Forum 09-057: Sending Another 'Jimmy Carter' to N. Korea

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# Sending Another 'Jimmy Carter' to N. Korea

Policy Forum Online 09-057A: July 14th, 2009

By Selig S. Harrison

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## I. Introduction

Selig S. Harrison, Director of the Asia Program at the Center for International Policy, writes, "Progress towards denuclearization would require U.S. steps to assure North Korea that it will not be the victim of a nuclear attack... Realistically, if the U.S. is unwilling to give up the option of using nuclear weapons against North Korea, it will be necessary to live with a nuclear-armed North Korea while maintaining adequate U.S. deterrent forces in the Pacific."

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## II. Article by Selig S. Harrison

- "Sending Another 'Jimmy Carter' to N. Korea"

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North Korea is often accused of dishonoring the commitments it makes in negotiations. However, in North Korean eyes, it is the U.S. that has failed to live up to its promises. This is the main reason why military hard-liners have been able to take control of North Korean foreign policy in the past six months and justify an increasingly provocative series of nuclear and missile tests in internal policy debates.

Kim Jong-il's failing health and his reduced work schedule have made it easier for the hard-liners to consolidate control. Their strength is rooted in a cavalier U.S. disregard of its commitments that has vindicated their opposition to the 1994 Agreed Framework and the 2007 six-party denuclearization agreement.

For nearly eight years, from June, 1994, to December, 2002, the moderates in North Korea led by First Deputy Foreign Minister Kang Sok-ju prevailed, and North Korea suspended its nuclear weapons program over the bitter protests of the hard-liners. In return, North Korea was promised two light water reactors as a token of U.S. readiness for normal relations. The reactors were never built, however, despite large South Korean and Japanese financial outlays. The Bush Administration not only abrogated the Agreed Framework, but dissolved the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO) and bludgeoned South Korea into approval in order to leave no doubt that the U.S. had repudiated its commitment.

Despite this, the moderates were able to get Kim Jong-il to support the six-party process with help from China and to disable the Yongbyon reactor. In return, the six parties pledge of 600,000 tons of oil. Although Japan, angered by the U.S. decision to remove North Korea from its List of Terrorist States, refused to provide its share, 200,000 tons, and the moderates were once again discredited.

This is a very dangerous moment in our relations with North Korea, the most dangerous since June, 1994, when Jimmy Carter went to Pyongyang with the grudging consent of the Clinton Administration. Carter negotiated an agreement with Kim Il-sung that headed off a war and paved the way for the Agreed Framework. Now, we are in urgent need of another high-level emissary, but the Obama Administration is not even prepared to give its grudging consent to Al Gore. Gore has expressed interest in negotiating the release of Laura Ling and Euna Lee, the two imprisoned U.S. journalists and employees of Current TV, which he founded, and in the process pave the way for a reduction of tensions.

Gore met Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on May 11 and asked for the cooperation of the Obama administration in facilitating a mission to Pyongyang and in empowering him to succeed in such a mission by exploring with him ways in which the present stalemate in relations between North Korea and the U.S. can be broken. She said she would "consider" his request, but the Administration has subsequently delayed action. The Administration's position is that the case of the two imprisoned journalists is a "humanitarian" matter and must be kept separate from the political and security issues between the two countries. In a News Hour interview with U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice on June 10, Margaret Warner asked Rice how the latest U.N. sanctions resolution would "complicate efforts to win the release of the two American journalists." Rice turned the question around, declaring that the issue of the two journalists "cannot be allowed to complicate our efforts to hold North Korea accountable" for its nuclear and missile tests.

This is an unrealistic position. It shows a callous disregard for the welfare of Laura Ling and Euna

Lee. It ignores the danger of a war resulting from the Administration's naive attempts to pressure North Korea into abandonment of its nuclear and missile programs. Past experience with North Korea has repeatedly shown that pressure invariably provokes a retaliatory response that makes matters worse. The Administration should instead actively pursue the release of the two women through intervention in their behalf by a high-level unofficial emissary empowered to signal U.S. readiness for tradeoffs leading to the reduction of tensions, such as the provision of the 200,000 tons of oil that had been promised and not delivered to North Korea since the six-party talks broke off last fall.

Looking ahead, the goal of the U.S. should be to cap the North Korean nuclear arsenal at its existing level and to move toward normalized relations as the necessary precondition for progress toward eventual denuclearization. The prospects for capping the arsenal at its present level have improved as result of Pyongyang's June 13 announcement admitting that it has an R&D program for uranium enrichment. Since this program is in its early stages, and Pyongyang is not yet actually enriching uranium, there is time for the U.S. to negotiate inspection safeguards limiting enrichment to the levels necessary for civilian uses. Until now, North Korea's denial of an R&D program has kept the uranium issue off the negotiating table and kept alive unfounded suspicions that it is capable of making weapons-grade uranium.

Progress towards denuclearization would require U.S. steps to assure North Korea that it will not be the victim of a nuclear attack. In Article Three, Section One of the Agreed Framework, the U.S. pledged that it "will provide formal assurances against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the U.S." simultaneous with complete denuclearization. Pyongyang is likely to insist on a reaffirmation of this pledge. Realistically, if the U.S. is unwilling to give up the option of using nuclear weapons against North Korea, it will be necessary to live with a nuclear-armed North Korea while maintaining adequate U.S. deterrent forces in the Pacific.

In my view, in the event of another war with North Korea resulting from efforts to enforce the U.N. sanctions, it is Japan that North Korea would attack, not South Korea. Some of the hard-line generals in the National Defense Commission, I learned on my January visit to Pyongyang, were outraged at Kim Jong-il's apology to Prime Minister Koizumi in 2002 and have alarmed moderates in the regime with their swaggering confidence that North Korea could win a war with Japan.

### **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](mailto: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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