
Policy Forum 08-089: Setting a New Course with North Korea



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Setting a New Course with North Korea

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Setting a New Course with North Korea

By Bruce Klingner

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I. Introduction

Bruce Klingner, Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia in the Asian Studies Center at the Heritage Foundation, writes, "More troubling, however, is a growing sense that Pyongyang's obstructionist antics are not merely negotiating ploys but are instead designed to achieve international acquiescence to North Korea as a nuclear power. If that is the case, then it is prudent to begin contingency planning, including identifying financial sanctions that could be imposed against those companies and nations in violation of U.N. Resolution 1718."

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II. Article by Bruce Klingner

- "Setting a New Course with North Korea"

By Bruce Klingner

The Bush administration has careened between policy extremes in its attempts to denuclearize North Korea. Following an initial rejection of diplomacy as a viable means to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem, President Bush embraced a strategy that has often equated talking with progress and abandoned its stated principles as acceptable casualties of achieving an agreement.

Opposing ideological camps have battled for control of the policy tiller, leaving alienated allies tossed about in the U.S. ship of state's zig-zagging wake. Early on, President Bush allowed the disparate, conflicting policies to coexist, to the detriment of U.S. national interests. And when he finally decided, he came down on the side of legacy.

The chief beneficiary of this ineffective strategy has been the Kim Jong-il regime which gained acceptance of its illegal activities, constricted verification measures and potentially de facto recognition as a nuclear weapons state.

Last weekend's agreement to delist Pyongyang from the state sponsors of terrorism list in return for a watered-down verification protocol fit the Bush administration's pattern during the past two years, namely, issue bold pledges insisting on full compliance, criticize those who question U.S. resolve, and then capitulate to Pyongyang. Previously, the Bush administration walked away from a vow to insist that North Korea fully comply with its requirement to provide a "complete and correct" data declaration.

Washington claims that it received all that it asked for on verification, including applicability to North Korea's uranium-based nuclear weapons program and proliferation activities. Such claims, however, must be treated with skepticism given the Bush administration's apparent over eagerness for an agreement and its record on those two issues in particular.

As always with North Korea, the devil will be in the details of the agreement and, more importantly, Pyongyang's willingness to abide by its commitment. The U.S. abandoned its previous insistence that North Korea accept international standards of verification, particularly short-notice challenge inspections of suspect sites. Such inspections are part of the International Atomic Energy Agency nuclear safeguards that U.N. Security Council Resolution 1718 directed Pyongyang should abide by. Indeed, North Korea agreed in September 2005 to return "at an early date" to the IAEA safeguards.

With time running out on the Bush administration's second term, it is clear that the next U.S. president will inherit the burden of trying to keep Pyongyang on the path to denuclearization. Regardless of which candidate wins the presidential election, he should incorporate several critical precepts into the U.S. negotiating strategy.

First, use all the instruments of national power (diplomatic, informational, military and economic) in a coordinated, integrated strategy. While it is important to continue negotiations to seek a diplomatic resolution to the North Korean nuclear problem, the U.S. and its allies should simultaneously use outside pressure to influence North Korea's negotiating behavior.

Second, talking is not progress. The U.S. should favor resolving issues rather than repeatedly lowering the bar simply to maintain the negotiating process. Similarly, Washington shouldn't negotiate with itself by offering a revised proposal if North Korea rejects the first.

Third, don't treat North Korea differently from every other country in the world. Insist that North

Korea abide by international standards of behavior and not allow Pyongyang to again carve out a "special status" within the Non-Proliferation Treaty and IAEA safeguards.

Fourth, define redlines and their consequences. The Bush administration's abandonment of its stated resolve to impose costs on North Korea for proliferating nuclear technology to Syria undermined U.S. credibility and sent a dangerous signal to other potential proliferators.

Fifth, consider establishing deadlines with consequences for failure to meet them. North Korea can't be allowed to indefinitely drag out the six-party talks in order to achieve de facto international acceptance as a nuclear weapons state. Repeatedly deferring difficult issues in response to Pyongyang's intransigence is not an effective means to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

North Korean denuclearization is a critically important goal. But, the ways and means in which it is attained are equally as important. Being excessively eager to compromise not only rewards abhorrent behavior but also undermines negotiating leverage necessary to get Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons.

More troubling, however, is a growing sense that Pyongyang's obstructionist antics are not merely negotiating ploys but are instead designed to achieve international acquiescence to North Korea as a nuclear power. If that is the case, then it is prudent to begin contingency planning, including identifying financial sanctions that could be imposed against those companies and nations in violation of U.N. Resolution 1718.

One thing is certain. The next U.S. president will be faced with a recalcitrant North Korean regime that will likely test him early in his administration with brinksmanship and nuclear saber-rattling. He will require a firm set of principles to effectively deal with the challenge.

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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