

Policy Forum 08-054: Simpleminded or Farsighted? - The US' handling of North Korea

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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 08-054: Simpleminded or Farsighted? - The US' handling of North Korea", NAPSNet Policy Forum, July 15, 2008, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/simpleminded-or-farsighted-the-us-handling-of-north-korea/>

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Policy Forum Online 08-054A: July 15th, 2008
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By Masahiro Matsumura

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I. Introduction

Masahiro Matsumura, Professor of International Politics at St. Andrew's University (Momoyama Gakuin Daigaku) in Osaka, writes, "At this moment, Washington should continue to block this aid as a matter of policy discretion through the Boards of Governors and the Executive Boards, wherein Tokyo also possesses a significant voting power to support Washington. Pyongyang will then be subjected to further economic penetration by China, involving the deepening of China's actual economic colonization. Under these parameters, Pyongyang would be constrained to negotiate sincerely with Washington and Tokyo."

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II. Article by Masahiro Matsumura

- "Simpleminded or Farsighted? - The US' handling of North Korea"

By Masahiro Matsumura

President Bush's proclamation removing North Korea from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism has the world puzzled about the underlying strategic calculations. This sharp, if not abrupt, turn in the US' North Korea policy has also appalled Japanese leaders and the public deeply concerned about the fate of many Japanese abductees long held in North Korea, a quintessential terrorist crime that Pyongyang has committed. Without a follow-up fix, US appeasement will definitely disturb the Japan-US alliance and the non-proliferation regime, possibly eventuating in turbulence in the regional and international security order.

Why President Bush believes North Korea is no longer a terrorist state is a riddle. Certainly, there is no evidence that Pyongyang has perpetrated a terrorist act in the past six months, which satisfies the narrow statutory requirements for rescinding North Korea's designation as a terrorist state and lifting economic sanctions imposed under the US Trading with the Enemy Act. Yet, no one believes North Korea has ceased to be an exemplar terrorist state. It remains under the identical regime that committed massive assassinations with bombs in Rangoon and against a Korean Airlines airplane, and in fact continues grave human rights violations within its own borders. Pyongyang may extradite members of the radical Japanese Red Army that it has harbored for decades, but only to get rid of a white elephant in pursuit of rescission. The President stated that he would "never forget" the abductions, arguably as a mere historical fact to be remembered. However, he can hardly nullify the statement's devastating effects on the Japanese public's confidence in the bilateral alliance, although, in the televised interviews thereafter, he reiterated the importance of the issue and its resolution through the Six Party Talks.

Enigmatically, President Bush compromised before securing Pyongyang's complete disablement of the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon and firm commitment to the complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of all of North Korea's nuclear programs. Despite a cessation of Yongbyon's nuclear reactor operation and the blasting of the cooling tower, the reactor remains capable of resuming operation just by building a new tower, given that the reactor still carries more than half of its 8,000 fuel rods. True, Pyongyang delivered a data declaration concerning its nuclear weapons programs, including some 19,000 pages of records on Yongbyon's operations. Yet, the declaration does not mention the whereabouts of enriched plutonium, nuclear warheads, and highly enriched uranium programs as well as suspected links with Syria. Instead, in April 2008, Pyongyang simply "acknowledged" the requisite data on its nuclear programs that Washington provided to bilateral meetings held in Singapore. It is obvious that Washington has unilaterally acquiesced to Pyongyang's procrastination tactics without any return. Such an extremely conciliatory approach contradicts any historic US arms control negotiations, even with the Soviet Union.

Even more mysterious is President Bush's calculation on how the unilateral concession to Pyongyang at this phase will best serve US interests, at both regional and global levels. By opting to co-exist with Pyongyang's nuclear warheads, Bush is virtually extending a de facto, if not de jure, nuclear power status to North Korea, at least during the protracted negotiation process that may or may not lead to the full dismantlement of Pyongyang's nuclear capability. No wonder Pyongyang now demands Washington enter into nuclear arms control negotiations, an implicit de jure recognition of its status. Granting an exceptional treatment to Pyongyang, even while taking the toughest possible stance against Iran's nuclear weaponization, involves a double standard in non-proliferation. This practice will inevitably shake the non-proliferation regime, an indispensable foundation of global security that has already been weakened due to the built-in inequality between the five nuclear "haves" and the "have-nots."

More importantly, many Japanese strategic thinkers find the President's proclamation at this timing very inscrutable, on the grounds that it now exposes not only non-nuclear Japan but also US forces in Japan to an impending nuclear threat from North Korea. These thinkers will have to discount the net utility of the bilateral alliance, which will inevitably result in hollowing out the political base of the alliance despite the cumulative institutional deepening of military-to-military coordination and cooperation between Japan and the US. Such development will only benefit North Korea and rising China.

A puzzling result of estranged Japan-US relations is that the new South Korean administration under Lee Myung-bak will be pressed to restart huge financial appeasement to Pyongyang. Lee has so far suspended various economic aid commitments to North Korea amounting to US\$2 billion that the former radical-left Kim Dae-jun and Roh Moo-hyun administrations extended over years. As long as the suspension continues, impoverished Pyongyang will be compelled to fully dismantle its nuclear capability, sooner rather than later.

Regrettably, President Bush does not have to be accountable for all these whys, since he made his proclamation at the end of June. Congress simply will not be able to veto it within 45 days, given the Capitol's dormancy beginning with the Independence Day holidays and lasting through the rest of the period due to the presidential and congressional election campaigns.

Washington and Tokyo now have to emulate Pyongyang's salami-slicing approach and strip Pyongyang of the infamous terrorist-state label while minimizing substantial benefits accruing therefrom. Pyongyang craves the economic aid from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank against which Washington, under the authority of the Trading with the Enemy Act, exercised a de facto veto based on the statutory prerogatives embedded in the charters. At this moment, Washington should continue to block this aid as a matter of policy discretion through the Boards of Governors and the Executive Boards, wherein Tokyo also possesses a significant voting power to support Washington. Pyongyang will then be subjected to further economic penetration by China, involving the deepening of China's actual economic colonization. Under these parameters, Pyongyang would be constrained to negotiate sincerely with Washington and Tokyo.

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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