

Policy Forum 10-061: Strategic Patience Has Become Strategic Passivity



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By James E. Goodby and Donald Gross

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I. Introduction



James E. Goodby, former US ambassador and special representative for Nuclear Security and Dismantlement and affiliate of the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at The Brookings Institution and Donald Gross, former senior advisor in the U.S. Department of State and former Asia policy advisor to President Obama, write, "Although a solution to the basic political and security issues in Northeast Asia is not likely to be found in the near future, we should be clear about one other thing: U.S. disengagement from talks with North Korea effectively contributes to instability in the region. Strategic patience is no longer viable. Diplomatic initiatives and vision must replace passivity, and soon."

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II. Article by James E. Goodby and Donald Gross

-“Strategic Patience Has Become Strategic Passivity”

By James E. Goodby and Donald Gross

While the Obama administration pursued a policy of “strategic patience” towards North Korea during its first two years in office, Pyongyang continued to create “facts on the ground.”

In this period and during the last years of the Bush administration as well, North Korea conducted nuclear weapons tests and flight tests of missiles. It built a uranium enrichment plant and is constructing a new nuclear reactor. It repudiated the 1953 Armistice Agreement that suspended hostilities, but did not legally end the Korean War. It recently sank a South Korean warship and bombarded a South Korean island, killing four people, wounding several, and severely damaging civilian property.

The Obama administration says that it will not return to a process which rewards North Korea for bad behavior. But the bad behavior goes on. Sanctions have not yielded results. Toughening the already strict sanctions against North Korea requires a level of cooperation from China that is not likely to occur. Tough action just by the United States, South Korea, and Japan will not suffice.

No doubt, Pyongyang’s pernicious behavior is the fundamental reason for the failure to come to closure in the Six Party talks on North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. But a contributing factor

has been the inability of successive U.S. administrations to keep a high-level focus on managing the North Korea portfolio and pursue a coherent policy goal. A policy of so-called “strategic patience” will not fix that problem.

Fortunately, after years of false starts, miscalculations, and willful blindness to the real complexities of nuclear weapons issues on the Korean Peninsula, it now appears that a consensus has finally emerged in Washington that nothing less than a broad approach to North Korea has any chance of resolving the nuclear issue. The Obama team has accepted this.

As President Obama noted in his Veterans Day speech to U.S. troops located just south of the Demilitarized Zone: “we’ve made it clear that North Korea’s continued pursuit of nuclear weapons will only lead to more isolation and less security for them....If they choose to fulfill their international obligations and commitments to the international community, they will have the chance to offer their people lives of growing opportunity instead of crushing poverty – a future of greater security and greater respect....”

Consistent with President Obama’s views, U.S. strategic objectives, at a minimum, should be to deter and, if possible, reduce the military threat that North Korea poses to its neighbors and to the United States. The United States also has an interest in transformative diplomacy in the region, including inducing a change in how North Korea’s government treats its own citizens.

But strategic patience tends to support the status quo rather than encourage change. To regain the initiative, the United States needs, as a first step, to embrace a concept of what a peace system for the Korean peninsula would look like. That means something more than vague references to a peace treaty and economic cooperation, which is about all the Obama administration has said so far. The U.S. should launch a two-track approach, with one track focusing on regional security and the other on North Korean issues.

The potential for transformative diplomacy in Northeast Asia is huge but requires leadership from Washington. A fully-functioning multilateral security mechanism for Northeast Asia, perhaps derived from the Six-Party talks, could be a much needed agent for change. A multilateral organization is not a panacea: many sensitive issues will continue to be handled through other channels. But a multilateral consultative mechanism could help lead the region to a stable peace.

As soon as it can be arranged, therefore, the five nations that have been trying to negotiate with North Korea should convene a meeting of their foreign ministers. North Korea also could be invited. It might not attend, but a meeting like this would bring added diplomatic pressure on Pyongyang and could lead to a Five-Party Forum that would be useful in its own right.

Engagement with North Korea eventually will require a direct discussion between a top North Korean leader and a comparable official from the United States government. A conversation in Beijing between General James Jones (USMC), President Obama’s former National Security Advisor, and one of Kim Jong-Il’s senior military deputies on North Korea’s National Defense Commission is one possibility that should be considered.

What to do next? Replacing the 1953 Armistice Agreement with a U.S.-DPRK *interim agreement* for regulating military activities on the Korean Peninsula might be the best move, in the context of North Korea's renewed commitment to disabling and dismantling its nuclear weapons program. Other nations, especially the ROK, should join in. This interim agreement would not be a peace treaty, since relations are not yet mature enough for that.

An interim agreement could define borders, including the Northern Limit Line, and provide a Consultative Mechanism for nations most directly concerned with the Armistice Agreement. It could include military confidence-building measures like an "incidents at sea" agreement, which helped the U.S. and Soviet navies avoid confrontations in the last years of the Cold War. It would be a genuine step forward.

Although a solution to the basic political and security issues in Northeast Asia is not likely to be found in the near future, we should be clear about one other thing: U.S. disengagement from talks with North Korea effectively contributes to instability in the region. Strategic patience is no longer viable. Diplomatic initiatives and vision must replace passivity, and soon.

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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