

Policy Forum 10-048: Testing North Korean Waters

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Testing North Korean Waters

Policy Forum 10-048: September 1st, 2010
Donald P. Gregg

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I. Introduction

Donald P. Gregg, National Security Adviser to Vice President George H. W. Bush from 1982 to 1988, Ambassador to Korea from 1989 to 1993, and Chairman Emeritus of the Korea Society, writes, "Mr. Carter, known for his independence and his willingness to enter into controversy, may well have come back with more than Mr. Gomes. The insights he will have picked up from his talks with top leaders other than Kim Jong-il should coincide with an emerging realization within the Obama administration that its current stance toward the North, featuring sanctions and hostility, is having little positive impact, and that a return to some form of dialogue with Pyongyang needs to be considered... There also is a growing realization in Washington that alienating China is an inordinately high price to pay for putting pressure on Pyongyang. So the White House, in choosing to

send Mr. Carter at this time, may deserve credit for seeking to change a hostile stance toward North Korea into a more effective policy.”

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II. Article by Donald P. Gregg

-“Testing North Korean Waters”

By Donald P. Gregg

Former President Jimmy Carter deserves great credit for traveling to Pyongyang and securing the release of a U.S. citizen, Aijalon Mahli Gomes, who had been sentenced to eight years in prison for illegally entering North Korea.

The Obama administration had gone out of its way to assert that Mr. Carter was on this mission as a private citizen and that he carried no message from the White House. The North Koreans also made clear to Mr. Carter before his departure that he would not be able to meet the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il. In fact, Mr. Kim left for China shortly after Mr. Carter’s arrival.

Still, the Carter visit may help the White House to soften the hostility of its stance toward Pyongyang, especially since the sinking of a South Korea naval ship last March.

Given the difficult agenda he inherited when he came into office, President Barack Obama did not give high priority to dealing with North Korea, whose leaders were seen as obscure and irascible.

For example, a suggestion last year that the White House invite Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il’s youngest son and probable successor, to the United States was not seriously considered.

Instead, President Obama formed a strong relationship with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, whom he saw as the dynamic leader of a strong American ally, and was content to let Seoul set the pace in terms of dealing with Pyongyang.

Mr. Lee’s policies toward North Korea were considerably tougher than those of his two predecessors, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, both of whom met with Kim Jong-il. Mr. Lee, by contrast, cut economic aid to the North and increased pressure for political concessions from Pyongyang.

Still, a year ago, it seemed possible that relations between Seoul and Pyongyang might improve. A North Korean delegation to the August 2009 funeral of former President Kim Dae-jung, champion of the “sunshine policy” of engagement with North Korea, was warmly received by President Lee. Later in 2009, North Korea proposed a North-South summit meeting and also invited Kim Dae-jung’s widow to visit Pyongyang.

But while these conciliatory gestures by North Korea were still under consideration, on March 26 the South Korean Navy frigate Cheonan exploded and sank under mysterious circumstances in the Yellow Sea just off the coast of the Korean Peninsula, where North and South Korean naval vessels have often clashed.

A South Korean investigation concluded that the ship was sunk by a torpedo fired by a North Korean submarine. The United States concurred, and the sinking of the Cheonan came to be viewed in the United States as proof of North Korean infamy.

The United States imposed additional sanctions on the North and joined South Korea in staging military exercises of an unprecedented scope on sea and land.

One of South Korea’s leading diplomats put it to me this way: “The Lee government has burned all its bridges with North Korea, and has been undertaking hard-line policies with no exit strategy. The current North-South relationship resembles a classic game of chicken.”

One problem, however, is that not everybody agrees that the Cheonan was sunk by North Korea.

Pyongyang has consistently denied responsibility, and both China and Russia opposed a U.N. Security Council resolution laying blame on North Korea.

In June, Russia sent a team of naval experts to look over the evidence upon which the South Korea based its accusations. Though the Russian report has not been made public, detailed reports in

South Korean newspapers said the Russians concluded that the ship's sinking was more likely due to a mine than to a torpedo. They also concluded that the ship had run aground prior to the explosion and apparently had become entangled in a fishnet, which could have dredged up a mine that then blew the ship up.

South Korea has not officially referred to the Russian conclusions. When I asked a well-placed Russian friend why the report has not been made public, he replied, "Because it would do much political damage to President Lee Myung-bak and would embarrass President Obama."

Recent statements by senior U.S. officials in Washington have continued to blame the Kims for the sinking of the Cheonan; it was purportedly done to prove the toughness of the ruling family as it prepares for another transition.

But whatever the impact of military maneuvers, economic sanctions and verbal attacks might be, those in Washington and Seoul who are hoping for a collapse of the Kim regime are doomed to disappointment. China will not let that happen.

China might not be happy with a nuclear-armed North Korea, but it is far more worried by instability on the Korean Peninsula.

Putting further pressure on Pyongyang also only strengthens its dependence on China. The increasing frequency of Kim Jong-il's trips to China, and the quality of the reception he receives, are clear indications of this trend.

American pressures are also likely to instill a mistrust and hostility toward the United States in the mind of Kim Jong-un, who is in his mid-20s and about whom little is known.

The disputed interpretations of the sinking of the Cheonan remain central to any effort to reverse course and to get on track toward dealing effectively with North Korea on critical issues such as the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Details of the South Korean investigation of the Cheonan tragedy have not been made public, and undercurrents of opposition to its conclusions are growing stronger in Seoul.

We do not know yet whether Mr. Carter discussed the Cheonan issue while he was in Pyongyang. We do know that the former U.S. president is respected in North Korea for having had a friendly and useful conversation with Kim Il-sung, the first North Korean ruler, in 1994. Thus it is likely that he did hear from North Korean leaders their version of what happened.

In my own meetings with North Korean officials over the years, I know them to be frank and articulate in expressing their government's positions.

Thus I believe that Mr. Carter, known for his independence and his willingness to enter into controversy, may well have come back with more than Mr. Gomes. The insights he will have picked up from his talks with top leaders other than Kim Jong-il should coincide with an emerging realization within the Obama administration that its current stance toward the North, featuring sanctions and hostility, is having little positive impact, and that a return to some form of dialogue with Pyongyang needs to be considered.

Stephen Bosworth, a former ambassador to Seoul and now the U.S. special envoy for North Korean issues, has long favored more dialogue with Pyongyang. There also is a growing realization in Washington that alienating China is an inordinately high price to pay for putting pressure on Pyongyang.

So the White House, in choosing to send Mr. Carter at this time, may deserve credit for seeking to change a hostile stance toward North Korea into a more effective policy.

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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