

Policy Forum 05-95A: The Cabal is Alive and Well

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Essay by Leon V. Sigal

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I. Introduction

Leon V. Sigal, director of the Northeast Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council in New York and author of " *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea* ", writes. "That leaves little choice for Hill but to go for an initial declaration -- a form of words for words. Although Hill sees that as part of negotiating process in which any omissions can be cleared

up, hard-liners will surely use it to play gotcha, insisting that any omissions are conclusive evidence of North Korean cheating and grounds for breaking off talks."

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II. Essay by Leon V. Sigal

- The Cabal is Alive and Well
by Leon V. Sigal

For four years a cabal of hard-line unilateralists in the Bush administration led by Vice President Dick Cheney preferred provoking North Korea to arm rather than trying what Japan and South Korea thought might just get it to stop: diplomatic give and take.

The United States has paid dearly for this flawed policy: reactivation of a once frozen nuclear reactor and reprocessing plant at Yongbyon, seven or eight more bombs' worth of plutonium, added nuclear leverage for the North, growing doubts in Tokyo and Seoul about U.S. reliability and enhanced Chinese influence in the region.

Still, the cabal survives unchecked. Faced with isolation at the fourth round of six-party talks if it did not go along, the Bush administration seemed to relent by accepting an agreement in principle drafted by China under which North Korea would abandon "all nuclear weapons and existing weapons programs."

The ink was hardly dry when the hard-liners struck back, undoing the deal and hamstringing U.S. negotiators. That all but assures the next week of talks will prove fruitless, generating renewed pressure in Asian capitals for Washington to deal.

Pyongyang is not about to settle for fine words any more than Washington is. It insists on concrete signs that Washington is ending enmity as it dismantles its nuclear programs. One sure sign it seeks is the nuclear reactors Washington promised under the 1994 Agreed Framework but never delivered.

Under the Faustian bargain at the core of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, members in good standing have the right to nuclear power. Pyongyang cannot exercise that right until it rejoins the NPT and eliminates any weapons and nuclear programs it now has to the satisfaction of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Washington balked at acknowledging this right, but under pressure from China and others it "agreed to discuss at an appropriate time the subject of the provision of light-water reactors to the D.P.R.K."

Yet, in a closing statement immediately after accepting the accord, negotiator Christopher Hill announced a decision, driven by hard-liners, to "terminate KEDO," the international consortium set up to construct the reactor. Later that day, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice implied that the "appropriate time" for discussion was when hell freezes over: "When the North Koreans have dismantled their nuclear weapons and other nuclear programs verifiably and are indeed nuclear-free ... I suppose we can discuss anything."

Pyongyang reacted sharply. "The basis of finding a solution to the nuclear issue between the D.P.R.K. and the U.S. is to wipe out the distrust historically created between the two countries and a physical groundwork for building bilateral confidence is none other than the U.S. provision of LWRs to the D.P.R.K.," a Foreign Ministry spokesman said, "The U.S. should not even dream of the issue of

the D.P.R.K.'s dismantlement of its nuclear deterrent before providing LWRs, a physical guarantee for confidence-building." An alternative "physical groundwork for building bilateral confidence" or "physical guarantees" are conceivable, so whether Pyongyang insists on Washington's commitment to provide reactors before it begins elimination remains to be seen.

Even worse, having declared in the September agreement that it had "no intention" of attacking the North "with conventional or nuclear weapons" and having pledged to "respect [D.P.R.K.] sovereignty," diplomatic code words for renouncing military options and regime change, the administration backed away. Under pressure from hard-liners, Hill undercut those commitments in Congressional testimony days later by sounding the hard-liners' old refrain that "all options remain on the table."

Worst of all, Hill wanted to go to Pyongyang to jump-start discussion of dismantlement. He seeks an initial declaration in which Pyongyang lists all its plutonium and uranium facilities, fissile material, equipment and components, which can be crosschecked against what U.S. intelligence has already ascertained.

Negotiating that declaration will require reciprocity by Washington, for instance, participating in the supply of electricity to the North, further relaxation of sanctions, and a willingness to normalize relations sooner. Instead of handing Hill bargaining chips, however, the cabal set a precondition for talks. Hill was instructed not to go unless the North shut down its Yongbyon reactor, assuring that no talks took place.

The North has offered to freeze the reactor and reprocessing plant, including the return of all the 1994 batch of plutonium to inspection. Such a freeze is a logical place to begin, but the cabal has made it difficult by blocking any reciprocal U.S. step. Their reasoning is as simple as ABC -- anything but Clinton. The cabal is also likely to keep Hill for amassing enough bargaining chips for an alternative that will give both sides something concrete to show for their efforts -- what might be called freeze-plus -- some token elimination of some of the post-1994 plutonium.

That leaves little choice for Hill but to go for an initial declaration -- a form of words for words. Although Hill sees that as part of negotiating process in which any omissions can be cleared up, hard-liners will surely use it to play gotcha, insisting that any omissions are conclusive evidence of North Korean cheating and grounds for breaking off talks.

So long as the cabal dictates policy, the administration will be better at undoing international deals than doing them, antagonizing allies and subverting U.S. security in the bargain.

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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