

Policy Forum 05-25A: The Folly of Forcing Regime Change



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Kenneth Lieberthal

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I. Introduction

Kenneth Lieberthal is a professor of political science and of business administration at the University of Michigan, and is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution. He was special assistant to the US president for National Security Affairs and senior director for Asia on the National Security Council, 1998-2000. Kenneth Lieberthal writes: "North Korea is both morally repugnant and a maddening

adversary in negotiations. But simply going through the motions of negotiation in the hope that regime change will somehow happen enhances Kim Jong-Il's opportunity to develop and proliferate nuclear capabilities."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by Kenneth Lieberthal

- "The Folly of Forcing Regime Change"
by Kenneth Lieberthal

North Korea's announcement that it has nuclear weapons brings the dangers of Pyongyang's nuclear capability back to centre stage. Washington says it is giving multilateral diplomacy yet another try but many, such as John Bolton, the new nominee for US ambassador to the United Nations, regard North Korea's regime as so morally bankrupt and politically dishonest that no deal worth having can be struck with it.

Because Washington lacks good military options to terminate the North's nuclear program, those who oppose negotiating a deal are arguing that regime change is the only basis for real resolution of the nuclear issue. But advocates of regime change have failed to make clear the consequences suggested by the following four scenarios.

Regime change could produce a period of chaos. Millions of people would be likely to take to the roads seeking food and other assistance, with huge numbers desperate to cross the Chinese and South Korean borders. Forces from China, the US and South Korea could soon be drawn in to choke off those flows, seek to establish relief operations, and try to nail down the location and control of North Korea's stockpiles of nuclear weapons and/or weapons-grade plutonium.

Resistance to a foreign presence could produce deadly fights between North Korean soldiers and other armed groups, as well as foreign forces.

A coup leading to civil war in North Korea could come about if some in the North Korean military sought to replace Kim Jong-Il and then struck an agreement with the US and others. Others in the military could well resist. The coup leaders might then seek to bring in outside forces to support them, which could lead the violent resisters to seize (if they do not already control), then threaten to use or sell, nuclear weapons or plutonium to bolster their leverage.

A coup by the military or police in North Korea could topple Mr Kim only to replace him with another dictator to manage North Korea better.

The human rights situation in the North would not improve and there is no reason to believe that these individuals would prove more responsible than Mr Kim has been.

Finally, a coup could see a reformist group seize power and propose unification with South Korea. If this group could establish and sustain its authority and South Korea could get organized quickly enough, an agreement on staged, peaceful unification might be worked out. But even in this ideal case, the ensuing financial and other demands on the South would be overwhelming, far greater as a proportion of its economy and other resources than was the case when West Germany took over East Germany more than a decade ago. This development would also undercut the rationale for the current US-South Korea defense alliance and upset regional security arrangements.

These four scenarios are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. They offer three lessons.

First, the Bush administration should seriously re-think regime change as a desired outcome.

Second, regime change in North Korea could lead to direct involvement of US, Chinese and South Korean military forces on what is now North Korean territory.

Given this possibility, the three militaries should hold quiet talks among operational commanders to reduce the chances of future distrust and miscommunication.

Finally, all of the above scenarios would seriously jeopardize South Korean interests. Even peaceful unification is far more costly to the South than is its current effort to induce gradual reform of the North Korea regime. South Korea also believes such reform will increase its ability to use co-operation with, and investment in, North Korea to economic competitive advantage against China and others. South Korea is thus likely to view US failure to pursue serious, step-by-step negotiations with the current North Korean regime as a stab in the back, with substantial repercussions for America's future position in north-east Asia. To mitigate the damage that regime change in North Korea could inflict on US-South Korea ties, Washington has to consult and co-ordinate with Seoul very closely.

North Korea is both morally repugnant and a maddening adversary in negotiations.

But simply going through the motions of negotiation in the hope that regime change will somehow happen enhances Kim Jong-Il's opportunity to develop and proliferate nuclear capabilities. Regime change itself might worsen rather than improve security and human rights.

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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