

Policy Forum 05-24A: The North Korean Crisis

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The North Korean Crisis

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Desaix Anderson

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I. Introduction

The following is text of a speech given on March 8, 2005 by Desaix Anderson at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. Desaix Anderson writes: "Kim Jong Il has repeatedly claimed, again last week, that North Korea seeks a solution that would eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons programs in exchange for ending U.S. hostility. Given the stakes, the

U.S. is irresponsible not to test Kim's real intentions by serious negotiations."

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II. Essay by Desaix Anderson

-"The North Korean Crisis"

by Desaix Anderson

Since World War II, after fighting costly wars in Korea and Vietnam to rebuff communist aggrandizement, the United States is now risking its paramount position in East Asia through inept handling of the North Korean nuclear issue. Obsessed with terrorism, Iraq, and now tyranny, the Bush administration has failed to deal effectively with the North Korean crisis. This grave mistake could cost the United States its alliances and its pre-eminence in Asia - vital to America's interests in the 21st century.

Strategic Implications of the Korean Crisis

Washington's handling of the North Korean issue has put the United States at serious odds with all its allies and partners in the region - South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia. All have repeatedly urged the U.S. to pursue serious negotiations with the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK), but U.S. performance has not matched their hopes or expectations.

China deserves great credit for having persuaded the United States and the DPRK to come to the negotiating table three times. Exasperated with U.S. intransigence, China openly pressured the DPRK from 2002 on to accept the U.S. demands for a multilateral format, and has been embarrassed since by U.S. ideologically-driven rigidity. All our friends are profoundly disturbed by Washington's inflexibility.

Washington's slightly more forthcoming presentation at the third round June 2004 Six-Party Talks was welcome, but it apparently stemmed from domestic political considerations and was a cosmetic response to Asian capitals' complaints at U.S. inflexibility more than an epiphany in the Bush administration. Neither North Korea, nor our allies, considers the U.S. proposal adequate, since the proposal demands that the DPRK reveal and give up its nuclear facilities as a condition for beginning negotiations of all other issues. The U.S. has used the Six Party Talks only to perpetuate stalemate. Pyongyang's bombshell announcement February 10 that North Korea has now manufactured nuclear weapons would make North Korea a nuclear-weapons state. This is a stunning policy failure by the Bush administration.

Korean Anti-Americanism Rising

Most impacted has been South Korea, one of America's closest allies for fifty years. President Bush stunned South Koreans and all our Asian friends by inclusion of North Korea in the "axis of evil" in his State of the Union Speech in January 2002.

The alarming rise of anti-Americanism in South Korea stems from deeply diverging threat perceptions in Seoul and Washington. Many South Koreans conclude that Washington is insensitive to Korean goals, that the Bush administration ineffectual dealing with North Korea is blocking hopes for North-South reconciliation. Criticism of American arrogance and unilateralism played a significant role in the election in 2001 of human rights lawyer, Roh Moo Hyun as South Korea's President. He and his young South Korean supporters favor rapidly expanding engagement with the

North and oppose Washington's hard-line approach.

Polls consistently indicate that a majority of South Koreans, particularly the young, see the United States as more dangerous than North Korea, based on the presumption that the U.S. might attack North Korea. In contrast, China is seen as more constructive.

Nationalism and democracy are on the march in South Korea.

Koizumi-Bush Partnership

Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi has staked his legacy on close cooperation with the Bush administration. He has broadened the interpretation of participation of Japan's Self-Defense Forces in external contingencies, and sent some 1000 non-combatant humanitarian Self-Defense personnel to Iraq. Tokyo is increasingly committed to joining Bush's "missile defense initiative."

Prime Minister Koizumi, has generally sided with the harder line approach of Washington, but even PM Koizumi last August joined South Korea, China and Russia in urging the United States to negotiate more flexibly with the DPRK. In response, President Bush peremptorily rejected PM Koizumi's personal appeal.

The Broader Asian Context

Clumsy, uncoordinated actions by the U.S. which exacerbate the Korean crisis have raised legitimate questions in Tokyo, Beijing and Seoul about Washington's judgment.

None of the surrounding powers wants a nuclear-armed Korea, North or South. China and South Korea are acutely concerned about the collapse of North Korea's economy that could create dangerous instability with impact over their borders.

If the outcome of this crisis is a nuclear-armed North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia will all blame the U.S. for having refused to talk seriously with Pyongyang. South Korea, Taiwan, and even Japan might re-consider a nuclear option.

The North Korean Crisis

Let me make absolutely clear one point. Kim Jong Il is a ruthless despot, but that is not the point. The question is whether or not U.S. policies are serving American and our allies' interest, and I firmly believe that they are not.

Kim Jong Il appears to have learned a great deal during his long tutelage by his father, Kim Il Sung. Contrary to earlier CIA assessments, he appears to be a coherent leader capable of perceptive strategic analysis. He has steered an impoverished country with both verve and comparative strategic success, considering the weak hand he inherited in 1994.

The collapse in 1991 of the North Korea's life-support system - from the Soviet Union -- and the elimination of special friendship price support from China - precipitated an existential crisis in North Korea, second only to the devastation of North Korea by U.S.-led UN forces and humiliating retreat of Kim Il Sung's forces to the Yalu River in late 1950.

With the new Russia ideologically and financially bankrupt after collapse of the Soviet Union, Kim Il Sung decided to attempt to balance the DPRK's relationship with its sole remaining ideological ally, China, with a new relationship with the United States.

In typical Korean fashion, Kim Il Sung then provoked a crisis by threatening withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty.

This crisis was resolved by the intervention of former President Carter and Kim Il Sung, days before Kim Il Sung's death.

Kim Jong Il seized the life-line of the Carter-Kim Il Sung initiative that led to conclusion of the US-DPRK Agreed Framework in October 1994.

Through the Agreed Framework, Pyongyang would seek to achieve its security and continued existence based on an end of hostility and movement toward a new, normalized relationship with Washington.

Through the prism of the new US-DPRK relationship, Pyongyang would achieve new relationships with Seoul and Tokyo.

Both were seen as pawns in the larger dynamic between China and the United States, but both could provide substantial economic means for overcoming the DPRK's dire economic straits.

Pyongyang would also seek to strengthen its relationship with China to ensure economic and political support, China's non-interference in North Korea's internal affairs, and because China was the rising global power on its border. Despite these factors, Pyongyang remains wary of Beijing's ultimate intentions.

By 1997-98 Pyongyang chafed at the lack progress in normalizing US-DPRK relations, a commitment in the Agreed Framework.

Dissatisfaction with the U.S. connection and the felicitous offer by Pakistan's A. Q. Khan in 1998 to trade missile technology for highly enriched uranium technology led Kim Jong Il ostensibly to hedge his bets even though it violated the Agreed Framework and the North-South nuclear agreement of 1991.

This possible violation notwithstanding, the Agreed Framework froze the existing North Korean reactor, precluded reprocessing of 8000 spent fuel rods from 1994 until 2002, and kept North Korea from having fuel theoretically for perhaps fifty nuclear weapons;

President Bush's reflexive hostility toward North Korea shocked Kim.

Refusal by Bush to talk directly to Pyongyang, threatening, hostile comments by Bush Administration about "regime change" in Pyongyang, inclusion of North Korea in Bush's "axis of evil" and the U.S. strategic position paper of September 2002 suggesting use of nuclear weapons to maintain US hegemony led Kim to conclude that Bush was intent on destroying his regime, as in Iraq, and accelerated Kim's efforts to achieve a nuclear breakout.

Kim noted that the Bush Administration invaded Iraq for supposed efforts to build nuclear weapons, but had not yet attacked Iran or North Korea, both of which were much closer than Iraq to achieving a nuclear breakout.

Kim also noted frequent comments by the Pentagon and influential figures that military attack on North Korea was not an option because of the devastation it would cause in South Korea.

The lesson was clear. Pyongyang should accelerate its efforts to develop its "nuclear deterrent,"

Washington, unwisely, for ideological convenience, used suspicions in late 2002 of the highly enriched uranium project to abrogate the Agreed Framework (throwing the baby out with the bath water), opening the way for Pyongyang to resume its nuclear activities at Yongbyon, and reprocess the 8000 spent fuel rods canned and under IAEA watch, as required by the Agreed Framework.

Whereas President Clinton had drawn a red line if Pyongyang reprocessed the fuel rods, Bush blithely ignored Pyongyang's crossing that thresh-hold.

Bush suggested a new red line: forbidding any export of nuclear materials or technology. This, in effect, invited North Korea to build not only the highly enriched uranium facilities, but also to reprocess the 8000 spent fuel rods. This reprocessing likely provided sufficient plutonium fuel for six more nuclear weapons, a gift of the "tough" Bush Presidency. Bush and South Korea's President Roh announced in March 2002 that North Korea would not be allowed to have nuclear weapons. This commitment has meant nothing.

Under Chinese pressure, Pyongyang humored the Bush Administration's insistence on Six-Party Talks, preserving Bush Administration "ideological purity" but the pro forma talks did nothing to stop Pyongyang's efforts "to expand its nuclear deterrent." Washington rejected North Korean proposals for freezing temporarily its acknowledged nuclear activities that also implicitly invited North Korea to continue its nuclear build-up;

Economic Changes

Importantly, on the economic front, after two visits to China, Kim Jong Il became convinced that modification of internal economic policies was essential for North Korea's survival and recovery.

From July 2002, Pyongyang announced modest and continuing modification of DPRK economic policies. Pricing has been somewhat liberalized, selective salaries doubled, and government-supplied rations ended for many. After meeting quotas, farmers are now allowed to sell in rapidly expanding local markets.

Pyongyang has cynically taken advantage of South Korean proposals to energize North Korea's economy, for example, by investing in the promising Kaesong economic zone, but nothing has been demanded or given in return. Ultimate results of these economic policies are not clear, but will remain carefully circumscribed to avoid de-stabilizing North Korea politically.

Kim Jong Il's Own Assessment:

Kim Jong Il must assess his strategic accomplishments along the following lines:

He has parlayed an extremely weak hand into a reasonably satisfactory strategic game.

Washington, in denial of reality, is on the defensive with its allies for failing to offer a significant proposal for resolution of the nuclear issue; President Bush has been unable or unwilling to over-rule his belligerent lieutenants, starting with VP Cheney.

China is seriously disgruntled with Washington but, nonetheless, continues to promote the Six-Party Talks. The rise of China as a regional and global power, Washington's pre-occupation with Iraq, its lack of leadership, and its outsourcing of Korea policy to China are steadily undermining Washington's international influence in Asia to China's benefit.

The U.S.-South Korea alliance has been seriously damaged by Washington's hard line policies. Bush's arrogant and unilateral policies will arouse mounting anti-Americanism in South Korea. This

estrangement will likely lead to a rupture of the alliance and leave North-South reconciliation under China's auspices.

Tokyo's toeing the U.S. hard line and its military build-up will reinforce animosities in the region, especially with China and South Korea. As U.S. influence weakens and Japan's military build-up continues a more nationalistic Tokyo will emerge.

Beijing will dominate the mainland East Asia strategic scene and the future of North-South Korean reunification. Only China might have the power to force the end of the DPRK's nuclear weapons aspirations. But, Pyongyang anticipates that China will settle for hegemony over the Korean Peninsula with constraining commitments from Pyongyang on its nuclear program.

The hope of reunification and inheriting the North's program will encourage Seoul's eventual acquiescence, assuming that North Korea dependence on the South's economic contributions will restrain the North, even with nuclear weapons.

The Bush Administration has already accepted, in effect, the reality of a nuclear-armed North Korea. There is no other rational explanation for its refusal to negotiate.

Washington's stance has encouraged enhancement of the DPRK nuclear deterrent.

But Kim Jong Il's commitment to China's leaders in his three visits to China, including last April, that North Korea would abandon its nuclear programs if Washington ended its hostile policy toward the DPRK, remains in place.

But the cost of a settlement has risen precipitously with each failure of Washington to negotiate seriously.

Kim Jong Il likely takes considerable satisfaction with his out maneuvering the Bush administration.

Pyongyang's "Bombshell"

Pyongyang's announcement February 10 that it was "suspending participation in the Six-Party Talks because of U.S. hostility" and that North Korea had manufactured nuclear bombs exposed the hollowness of the Bush administration's policy toward North Korea. In the eyes of North Koreans and many Americans, the emperor indeed has no clothes. The Bush administration has been in deep denial regarding North Korea's nuclear activities and is deluding itself to think that China and South Korea are going to join Washington in pressuring North Korea to end its chase of nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately, the pattern exposed is clear. The Bush administration believes that diplomacy is only coercion, not mutually negotiated resolution of problems. Prior to the invasion of Iraq, Washington kept insisting that it was giving diplomacy a chance to work in the UN. There was no "war plan" on the President's desk. But it was all too clear what was going on; in fact, the U.S. was moving to invade Iraq regardless of the UN inspections or whether or not there was another UN resolution supporting the U.S. position. Washington had made its choice.

U.S. handling of Iran's nuclear ambitions bears ominous resemblance to the prelude to the invasion of Iraq. Rhetoric has been in steady build-up recently. Iran has become the number one threat, according to Cheney. Iran has changed from being "authoritarian" to a "totalitarian state," according to Condoleezza Rice. There is no plan for military action "at this point in time," she claimed. Washington has treated the efforts of France, Germany, and Britain to reign in Iran's nuclear ambitions with the same skeptical disdain showered on the UN prior to the Iraq invasion.

North Korea was supposed to wait in line for its turn, presumably after Iran, but Pyongyang has turned the tables on Washington.

For Kim Jong Il, U.S. policy was exposed by Condoleezza' Rice's inclusion of North Korea in her neat bag of "outposts of tyranny." Bush's nomination of radical hard-liner John Bolton to become U.S. ambassador to the UN is contemptuous of the UN and accentuates a policy of confrontation with North Korea and Iran.

We had better get serious. There are three options:

Possible Options

1) We can pursue Bush-style diplomacy, ratchet up the pressure, escalate the rhetoric aggressively to attempt to change the regime in Pyongyang. South Korea, China, and Russia will not join such an undertaking. We pursue this path administration radicals espouse with grave risk of war. With 11,000 long-range artillery pieces, North Korea could destroy Seoul, kill an estimated million South Koreans, Americans, and Japanese, wreck South Korea's economy and endanger Japan's.

This approach is irrational but still appeals to Bush administration radicals. With the crisis in Iraq stretching our regular and reserve forces to exhaustion, we have few forces to deploy in a possible conflict in Korea.

2) As a second alternative, the Bush administration can continue not to deal seriously with the North Korean threat. In so doing all our friends in Northeast Asia will condemn Washington for failure to manage this immensely serious threat.

In both these options, the U.S. will lose the strategic struggle that is gathering speed for pre-eminence in Northeast Asia.

China will assume that role by default. South Korea is already moving steadily into China's sphere of influence. South Korea's trade with China has surpassed that with the U.S., as has Japan's. South Korea's political and security affinity for Beijing is increasingly close, against the backdrop of growing disenchantment with Washington. Beijing could assume responsibility for Korean matters, managing a nuclear-armed Korea or with Koreans beholden to China for resolution of security issues in Northeast Asia and Korean reunification under Beijing's, not Washington's leadership.

The Bush Administration has, in effect, subcontracted American responsibilities for resolving the Korean crisis to Beijing.

3) As a third alternative, the U.S. could exercise its historic leadership to negotiate a settlement with North Korea and lead the Six-Party talks to construct a durable framework for peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.

Conclusion: New Strategic Directions

We need a new strategic direction. A more realistic strategy could promote a more promising environment for American influence in East Asia and perhaps avoid the dismal alternatives that I have described:

America's focus on terrorism and Iraq, now tyranny, needs to be balanced by renewed engagement on other strategic and economic issues.

President Bush should break the deadlock in his administration and give full authority to an

empowered special envoy to pursue bilaterally and with flexibility a comprehensive solution to the nuclear issues related to North Korea. We need former Defense Secretary Bill Perry to rework his magic as he did in 1998.

The President is responsible for our national security interests and, so long as he lets radical conservatives exercise a veto, the President himself is risking American and U.S. allies' national security interests, and the future strategic orientation of East Asia. The President can no longer out-source American national interests in East Asia to Beijing. Washington must engage North Korea directly and forge a solution.

Despite many signs to the contrary, Kim Jong Il may still be willing to eliminate North Korea's nuclear arsenal and facilities, basically in exchange for ending American hostility and obtaining security guarantees, gaining access to economic support from the rest of the world, particularly South Korea and Japan, and steady movement toward normalized relations with the United States.

Kim Jong Il has repeatedly claimed, again last week, that North Korea seeks a solution that would eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons programs in exchange for ending U.S. hostility. Given the stakes, the U.S. is irresponsible not to test Kim's real intentions by serious negotiations.

The price will be high, especially in light of Pyongyang's February 10 announcement, but that is the result of the Bush administration's failure thus far to deal with reality.

The key nuclear issue with North Korea must be negotiated essentially in talks between the U.S. and the DPRK, since Pyongyang regards only the U.S. as a threat to its national security. China Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing this Sunday again questioned the validity of U.S. intelligence in the briefing on the suspected highly enriched uranium project recently provided Chinese President Hu Jintao by special envoy Michael Green. Li also noted that the U.S. must negotiate the nuclear issue directly with the North Korea, contradicting emphatically what President Bush said in the third presidential debate.

However, such bilateral negotiations should be undertaken in the context of the Six-Party Talk format. After solution of the nuclear and missile issues, the Six-Party Talks could construct a comprehensive solution as the principal organization for building a peaceful and prosperous Northeast Asia.

America's vital interests and long-term strategic position in East Asia are at risk. Bush's denial of the crisis in North Korea gravely endangers our future in East Asia. To protect our national interests, President Bush should change course to resolve this issue.

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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