


Policy Forum 08-081: The Question President Bush Needs to Answer: Do You Really Believe Kim Jong-Il Will Give up His Nuclear Weapons?

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By Cheon Seongwhun

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I. Introduction

Cheon Seongwhun, a senior research fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), writes, "A laudable legacy that President Bush could leave for us may be to clarify all the confusion and suspicion about the Kim Jong-il regime's nuclear intentions and by doing so, remove a root cause of policy struggle in the United States, South Korea, China, and others."

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II. Article by Cheon Seongwhun

- "The Question President Bush Needs to Answer: Do You Really Believe Kim Jong-Il Will Give up His Nuclear Weapons?"

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The U.S. State Department on Oct. 11 removed North Korea from a list of state sponsors of terrorism, meeting Pyongyang's major demand in anticipation of reciprocal good behavior in verifying North Korea denuclearization. Contrary to common expectations, this decision would not give the Kim Jong-il regime any substantial benefits in the near future. For the delisting to bear any meaningful fruit, reform and openness of North Korean society must be present. It also should be noted that about 20 other sanctions will remain without changes.

The U.S. decision, however, will help Kim Jong-il reinforce his political legitimacy and authority that might have been weakened by his recent reported illness. Believing that their dear leader won a one-on-one match with President Bush, North Korean elites will launch an extensive propaganda campaign that Kim Jong-il brought Americans to their knees without a nuclear weapon compromise. Internationally, the Bush administration's decision might encourage further reckless behavior of other would-be proliferators.

The State Department also announced that a package of verification measures was agreed between Pyongyang and Washington and would be finalized and adopted by the upcoming six-party talks. This inspired hope for the time being. Some even suppose that the third stage of dismantlement will begin in a few months.

Contrary to this hopeful expectation, however, traditional wisdom suggest that even finalizing the verification protocol will be a hard task and the sixparty talks will encounter many "word mines" and "devils of details" in the course of verification. Moreover, it is doubtful that Kim Jong-il, who has just obtained what he most wanted (the delisting), would give more gifts to the outgoing Mr. Bush. He is more likely to wait for the next U.S. president.

A major motivation to rescind the designation of the DPRK as a state sponsor of terrorism is the Bush administration's aspiration to leave a legacy during its remaining tenure. Bugged down in the Iraq War, isolated in the world stage, and with no concrete achievements domestically, President Bush from his second term regarded the North Korean nuclear crisis as an opportunity to produce a political legacy.

In the course of what John Bolton called a "legacy frenzy" in his Sept. 6 Wall Street Journal article, the Bush administration has given up key principles such as the CVID (complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement), which is a step back from the initial position in the negotiations, and focused instead on any tangible result.

Now, we have an outcome which is this - disablement much less thorough than originally promised in February 2007, declaration missing major parts of the DPRK nuclear programs such as the uranium enrichment and proliferation activities, no assurance of when and how nuclear weapons be dismantled, and inadequate verification with many loopholes for the DPRK.

It is not unusual that American politicians often do harm to alliance interests for the sake of their political interests. For instance, President Clinton knew that the DPRK had run the Highly Enriched Uranium program with the help of Pakistan and violated the Geneva Agreed Framework. He did not disclose the fact, however, that his diplomatic legacy centered on the Agreed Framework might be damaged.

Instead, he accelerated normalization talks with North Korea, made exchanges with high-ranking officials, and issued a joint communique as if nothing was wrong with the North's compliance behavior. Under the motto of ABC (Anything But Clinton), it was the Clinton's North Korea policy that the Bush Administration officials heavily criticized and vowed to overhaul.

The current nuclear crisis erupted in October 2002 when the Bush Administration rightly revealed the DPRK's HEU program, which had long been masked by the Clinton administration's legacy frenzy. Few would have believed that President Bush would follow exactly the same path as President Clinton.

President Bush's delisting decision is more harmonious with Barack Obama's North Korea policy line than John McCain's. Obama emphasized direct talks with the leaders of rogue regimes and aggressive diplomacy, while McCain maintained a more principled position and highlighted the importance of the CVID principle. Thus, this decision is likely to be viewed as a political embarrassment to the Republican Party as much as a political triumph to the Democratic Party. To that extent, the Bush administration's legacy pursuit is less likely to succeed in the long run.

Since the beginning of the sixparty talks in August 2003, the Bush administration officials have argued that a key reason to have dialogues with North Koreans is to find out their nuclear intention - that is, whether the DPRK intends to give up nukes and return to the international nonproliferation regimes.

In the past five years, there were ups and downs in the sixparty talks, mixing hopes and frustrations. Some say there were significant achievements represented by various documents, and others say keeping the momentum of the talks is, in itself, meaningful.

But the plain fact is that North Korea's nuclear capacities have been quadrupled, nuclear testing was conducted and it secretly provided Syria with an upgraded version of the 5MWe reactor at Yongbyon - a plutonium producing machine. Compared to the mid-1990s, the amount of plutonium the DPRK can use to make bombs has increased from 7-12.5 kg to 28.5- 49 kg at the end of 2007. The possible number of nuclear warheads also has increased from 1- 5 to 5-20 or so, depending on various criteria.

North Korea bluntly conducted its first nuclear testing on Oct. 9, 2006, crossing a line set by the talks. From around 2001, North Koreans started to construct a 5MWe nuclear reactor in a secret location inside of Syria. That is, they had violated the line even before the talks started and

continued the violation until the reactor was forcibly destroyed by Israel in September 2007.

Despite these facts, it seems that the Bush administration still is trying to find out what Kim Jong-il's real nuclear intention is. For example, during his summit meeting with South Korean President Lee Myungbak, President Bush repeated his usual "wait and see" approach of what North Koreans will do. In response to a question whether he was concerned that North Korea might not make full disclosure, President Bush said that "you just have to wait and see whether they're sincere or not."

A real legacy for President Bush may not be in producing documents with North Koreans, whose thorough compliance cannot be guaranteed. It is likely to be more a burden than a heritage. A laudable legacy that President Bush could leave for us may be to clarify all the confusion and suspicion about the Kim Jong-il regime's nuclear intentions and by doing so, remove a root cause of policy struggle in the United States, South Korea, China, and others.

For that purpose, I would like to ask President Bush to answer this question: "President, based on your experiences in the past eight years, do you really believe that Kim Jong-il will give up his nuclear weapons?"

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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