

# Policy Forum 08-040: The Right Path With N. Korea

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# The Right Path With N. Korea

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Policy Forum Online 08-040A: May 20th, 2008  
The Right Path With N. Korea

By Siegfried S. Hecker and William J. Perry

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## I. Introduction

Siegfried S. Hecker, Professor at the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) at Stanford University, and William J. Perry, Secretary of Defense from 1994 through 1997, write, "in its remaining months, the Bush administration should focus on limiting North Korea's nuclear capabilities by concluding the elimination of plutonium production. If it can also get answers on the Syrian operation and resolve the question of uranium enrichment, it will put the next administration

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in a stronger position to finally end the nuclear threat from North Korea."

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. Article by Siegfried S. Hecker and William J. Perry**

- "The Right Path With N. Korea"

By Siegfried S. Hecker and William J. Perry

The Bush administration's North Korea strategy is being criticized from the right and the left for letting Pyongyang off the hook. Some advocate scuttling the six-party talks. Others suggest slowing our own compliance with the agreement to get North Korea to make a full declaration of its nuclear program first. We disagree with both positions. Our mantra should be: It's the plutonium, stupid.

North Korea does have the bomb -- but a limited nuclear arsenal and supply of plutonium to fuel its weapons. The Yongbyon plutonium production facilities are closed and partially disabled.

In separate visits to North Korea in February, we concluded that the disablement was extensive and thorough. We also learned that Pyongyang is prepared to move to the next crucial step of dismantling Yongbyon, eliminating plutonium production. This would mean no more bombs, no better bombs and less likelihood of export. After this success, we can concentrate on getting full declarations and on rolling back Pyongyang's supply of weapons and plutonium.

We must not miss this opportunity, because we have the chance to contain the risk posed by North Korea's arsenal while we work to eliminate it. As dismantlement proceeds, negotiations should focus concurrently on the plutonium declaration, the extent of the uranium enrichment effort and Pyongyang's nuclear exports.

Pyongyang's declaration of 30 kilograms of plutonium (sufficient for roughly four to five bombs) falls short of the estimate of 40 to 50 kilograms, based on our past visits. We believe that North Korea is prepared to produce operating records and permit access to facilities, equipment and waste sites for verification. Obtaining and verifying its declaration of plutonium production and inventories is imperative. Let's proceed.

Pyongyang continues to claim that it has made no efforts to enrich uranium, despite strong evidence to the contrary. Although it appears unlikely that these efforts reached a scale that constitutes a weapons threat, a complete accounting is required. Dismantlement of the Yongbyon facilities should not, however, be postponed to resolve this issue. In October 2002, the Bush administration accused North Korea of covert uranium enrichment, only to have Pyongyang withdraw from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and produce plutonium to fuel the arsenal that we are now attempting to eliminate.

Nuclear exports are of greater concern. As recently revealed evidence demonstrates, North Korea sold nuclear technology to Syria, much as it sold missile technology. North Korea must cooperate if we are to get to the bottom of the Syrian incident and ensure that it is not repeated elsewhere. Israel eliminated the Syrian threat, for now, by bombing the reactor at Al Kibar. But it is imperative that Pyongyang reveal the nature and extent of its export operations and, most important, whether it has similar deals underway with Iran.

We do not advocate letting Pyongyang off the hook, but a "confession" regarding Syria is not the critical issue. We have good knowledge of what the North Koreans supplied to Syria. What we really

need is information from North Korea that will help us deal with potential threats. For example, was North Korea acting alone, or was it part of a more sophisticated proliferation ring involving Pyongyang's trading partners and suppliers? North Korea's leadership must resolve all three declaration issues fully, and these will take time to verify.

To ultimately succeed in the peaceful elimination of nuclear weapons, we must understand why North Korea devoted its limited resources to going nuclear. The September 2005 six-party joint statement addresses many of these concerns, promising mutual respect for national sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, and a commitment to stability and lasting peace in Northeast Asia, as well as normalization of relations. Given the acrimonious history of our relations, such steps require a transformation in the relationship between North Korea and the United States, a change that will first require building trust -- step by step.

The six-party negotiations have put us on that path, and there is much evidence of winds of change blowing in North Korea that will make navigating that path easier (the recent New York Philharmonic concert in Pyongyang is one such symbol of change; the joint industrial facility at Kaesong is another). But North Korea's reluctance to provide full declarations and the Syria revelations have moved us in the wrong direction.

Nevertheless, walking away from the talks or slowing them at this point would be counterproductive. Instead, in its remaining months, the Bush administration should focus on limiting North Korea's nuclear capabilities by concluding the elimination of plutonium production. If it can also get answers on the Syrian operation and resolve the question of uranium enrichment, it will put the next administration in a stronger position to finally end the nuclear threat from North Korea.

### **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](mailto: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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