

Policy Forum 08-071: The Way We Should Deal with North Korea

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By Haksoon Paik

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Article by Haksoon Paik](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

I. Introduction

Haksoon Paik, North Korea specialist at the Sejong Institute in South Korea, an independent think tank devoted to the study of national strategy of Korea, writes, "Complete denuclearization of North Korea will come only with full-fledged trust. North Koreans appear to regard the U.S. demand for a "complete" verification mechanism as a trap set up by the hardliners in Washington D.C. to

undermine not only the hitherto gained achievements in the nuclear negotiations, but also the North Korean regime itself."

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II. Article by Haksoon Paik

- "The Way We Should Deal with North Korea"

By Haksoon Paik

A barrage of news reports on Kim Jong Il's alleged health problems have raised the serious question of how to deal with North Korea and its leader. While the focus of many of these news reports and expert analyses have been on speculative scenarios of power succession in North Korea, it is more important for the media and the governments of the United States and other countries involved in the Six-Party Talks to focus on the restoration of the Yongbyon nuclear facilities and the damage done to the relationship between the United States and North Korea over a verification mechanism for the DPRK's nuclear program. It is worth recalling that, thanks to the trust built between two sides since early 2007 through simultaneous actions taken despite lingering doubts and suspicions, we could even hope for the dismantlement of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program.

Our top priority should be to make maximum progress in our effort to denuclearize North Korea. Given the growing doubts and suspicions that the North Korea has over U.S. intentions, the more time we waste, the more likely North Korea is to choose to remain a nuclear weapons state. Additionally Kim Jong Il is a leader that we have dealt with and have significant knowledge of. More than anything else, he is a leader who has made a series of critical choices to denuclearize his country. It is important to remember that any new leadership that might replace him will inevitably go through a learning process, which will mean instability in North Korea and will impede the ability of the country to make critical decisions. We need to avoid such unpredictability concerning the North Korean nuclear deal and its implementation. Furthermore, any new leadership in North Korea may be more ready to seek Chinese and Russian help to secure its power, rather than trying to improve relations with the United States. This will have serious implications for the U.S.-Chinese rivalry in Northeast Asia in the years to come. Finally, if the military takes power in North Korea, it will unavoidably attempt to keep the DPRK's nuclear programs and weapons to itself, taking a maximum defensive posture against both domestic and external security uncertainties.

Therefore, it is in our interests not to irritate and infuriate Kim Jong Il, who by all indications is still currently in control of North Korea, by speculating on the post-Kim era, treating him as a lame duck leader, and by promoting such provocative ideas of transforming CONPLAN 5029 into OPPLAN 5029 in the preparation of North Korea's collapse. This is important in order to help Kim Jong Il support and abide by the denuclearization process he himself agreed to. People may not like Kim Jong Il, but what is more important for us is to have a deal with a North Korean partner who understands the business we do and shows a willingness to come to rational terms with us; good or bad. In this way Kim Jong Il may turn out to be a lesser evil for us. Yes, Kim Jong Il is a highly strategically-capable leader who could possibly manipulate the international community over certain issues, but whatever cards he may use, they inevitably fall within the purview of what we can expect based on our accumulated knowledge of his leadership and North Korea's capacity as a regime.

All in all, what we have to do under the circumstances is to offer a more flexible verification mechanism, so that North Korea will stop restoring Yongbyon nuclear facilities in the first place, thereby restoring trust between the US and North Korea. Complete denuclearization of North Korea

will come only with full-fledged trust. North Koreans regard the U.S. demand for a "complete" verification mechanism as a trap set up by the hardliners in Washington D.C. to undermine not only the hitherto gained achievements in the nuclear negotiations, but also the North Korean regime itself, just like the case of BDA financial sanctions on North Korea. For sure, we will never have a chance to denuclearize North Korea's plutonium or uranium enrichment programs, let alone nuclear weapons, if we don't "buy the heart" of the North Korean leadership and restore and strengthen trust between us and them.

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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[Return to top](#)
[back to top](#)

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