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# Policy Forum 07-019: Tug Of War With Shorter Rope: Hard-Liners Working To Trip Up Nuclear Talks



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By Leon V. Sigal

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## I. Introduction

Leon V. Sigal, Director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council in New York and author of *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*, writes, "It will be much harder now to convince North Korea that the U.S. is ready to end

enmity. They will not settle for words; they will insist on concrete actions. They are prepared to reciprocate if and when Washington cooperates. Only time and perseverance will tell if they are willing to give up their nuclear weapons."

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 Leon V. Sigal**

- "Tug Of War With Shorter Rope: Hard-Liners Working To Trip Up Nuclear Talks"  
By Leon V. Sigal

The Bush administration has struck a deal to get North Korea to suspend making plutonium for more nuclear weapons. It can get farther down the road to denuclearization if it continues to engage in direct diplomatic give-and-take and reconcile with the North.

But not if the hard-liners in Washington have their way. They insist Pyongyang will never live up to its pledge, made in the September 2005 round of six-party talks, to abandon "all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs." Their belief is faith-based. How can they be so sure?

The fact is, nobody knows, with the possible exception of Kim Jong Il, and the only way for Washington to find out is to proceed, reciprocal step by reciprocal step, in sustained negotiations. If it were up to hard-liners, Washington would never find out how far it can get with Pyongyang. They have blocked negotiations at every turn. Neither China nor South Korea would go along, however. They knew that pressure would only provoke the North to arm sooner than to change course or collapse. Regime change, if it ever came, would be destabilizing if not downright explosive.

Instead of going for the jugular by testing Pyongyang's stated willingness to abandon arming, the hard-liners showed an unerring instinct for the capillaries. They got the Bush administration to back away from all the commitments it made in the 2005 accord and seized on an investigation of money laundering at a bank in Macao to block talks.

The U.S. was right to try to prevent counterfeiting of U.S. currency and other illicit activities by North Korea, but the Treasury Department frightened banks everywhere into freezing the North's hard currency accounts--not only those with its ill-gotten gains from illicit activities, but also those with proceeds from legitimate foreign trade. That was a strange way to encourage economic reform in North Korea. To Pyongyang it looked more like another attempt at regime change.

That provoked it to engage in tit for tat by testing missiles and a nuclear device. To hard-liners in Washington, the North's nuclear test was conclusive proof of their conviction. At last, they persuaded China to side with sanctions.

For Pyongyang, however, the test was intended to demonstrate not only that it had the bomb, but also that it would never bow to American or Chinese pressure. Only U.S. willingness to end enmity and reconcile would get it to change course. When Beijing tried to get Pyongyang to call off missile tests in July, the North Koreans went ahead, knowing it would affront its ally. When China went along with a revised U.S. resolution in the UN Security Council condemning the tests and warning of sanctions, Pyongyang, undaunted, began preparations for a nuclear test. It surmised that China would back sanctions but nothing stringent enough to compel its collapse.

Hard-liners began crowing that they finally had Pyongyang where they wanted it, but when President Bush took office, the North had stopped testing longer-range missiles, had one or two

bombs' worth of plutonium, and was verifiably not making more. After six years of fanaticism on both sides, it had seven to nine bombs' worth, had resumed testing missiles, and had little reason to restrain itself from nuclear testing or, worse, generating more plutonium. Is that where the hard-liners wanted North Korea to be?

Bush did not. At last, he was ready to negotiate in earnest. It will be much harder now to convince North Korea that the U.S. is ready to end enmity. They will not settle for words; they will insist on concrete actions. They are prepared to reciprocate if and when Washington cooperates. Only time and perseverance will tell if they are willing to give up their 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](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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Nautilus Institute  
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:  
[nautilus@nautilus.org](mailto:nautilus@nautilus.org)