


Policy Forum 05-33A: U.S. Tries New Tack in Pursuing Interests, Stability in East Asia

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Bruce Klingner

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I. Introduction

Bruce Klingner, an Asia analyst at Eurasia Group, an independent research and consulting firm that provides global political risk analysis, writes: "Pyongyang will calibrate its strategy to take advantage of the divisive political landscape and seek to further isolate the US from South Korea and Japan from South Korea...Such efforts collectively undermine US objectives to present a unified negotiating position to Pyongyang as well as any future attempts to garner international support for stronger measures."

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II. Essay by Bruce Klingner

-U.S. Tries New Tack in Pursuing Interests, Stability in East Asia
by Bruce Klingner

Condoleezza Rice, U.S. Secretary of State, signaled a renewed US resolve to end the North Korean nuclear impasse by warning non-diplomatic methods would be considered after an implied though unspecified deadline. Although Rice's statements during her Asia trip were leavened with conciliatory language, Washington's unequivocal dismissal of Asian calls for US 'flexibility' will reinforce Chinese and South Korean perceptions of the need for their own diplomatic initiatives to prevent an escalation of tensions.

Rice's comments countered criticisms that the US has been overly focused on Iraq and lacked an Asian policy by clearly defining Washington's positions on a range of northeast Asian issues. Whether her remarks represent a new policy or a reiteration of previous positions is debatable; what is clear, however, is that Washington has entered a new phase in the pursuit of its national interests in Asia.

Diplomacy the Answer...For Now

. Rice repeatedly affirmed that the US remained committed to negotiations while clearly putting the onus on Pyongyang for the failure of the six way talks. She highlighted the incentives that Washington had already offered to Pyongyang, including recognizing North Korea as a sovereign nation, declaring that the US had no intention to attack or invade the North, and affirming a willingness to discuss Pyongyang's energy needs.

At the same time, however, the secretary introduced a critical new factor by underscoring that Washington's patience was not "endless" and Pyongyang's intransigence "can't go on forever." Rice warned Pyongyang that "we cannot simply afford to stand by and have a nuclear-armed Korean Peninsula with North Korea with nuclear weapons." Her comments reflect an intention to move beyond negotiations when, not if, diplomacy fails.

Secretary Rice admonished the other six way talks nations, "particularly China," that they must all "make very clear to the North Koreans that the time has come for them to return to the talks...in a constructive spirit that demonstrates that they really are ready to make a strategic choice about their programs." Though specifically denying a deadline existed, Rice stated a policy decision would be necessary "at some point" since North Korea, by its own admission, continues to improve their nuclear capability.

Kyodo News reported that US officials told other participating nations that Washington might increase pressure on Pyongyang if it continued to refuse participating in the six way talks beyond Rice's trip. Akitaka Saiki, Deputy Director General of the Japanese Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau and Tokyo's representative to the six way talks, reportedly proposed taking the nuclear issue to the UN Security Council in June if Pyongyang had not reengaged by June. It is not known if Saiki's comments reflect Tokyo's or Washington's official position.

Playing the Japan Card

. The Bush Administration perceives its efforts to address the twin threats of North Korea's nuclear ambitions and China's growing military power as hampered by an unreliable South Korean ally. As a result, Japan is playing an increasingly important role in US strategic calculations for the region.

The US has long advocated a stronger Japanese military role, first as a means to augment Washington's deterrence against the Soviet Union and later to defray US defense costs. Washington now sees Japan as an important bulwark against the looming shadow of the Chinese dragon. Then-Secretary of State Colin Powell told Japanese officials last August that Tokyo would need to revise Article 9 of Japan's pacifist constitution if the country were to attain a permanent UN Security Council seat. Secretary Rice affirmed US support for a Japanese position on the UNSC during her trip.

An increasingly confident Japan has in recent years stepped-up its efforts to attain status as a "normal country" and has evolved the role of its military. Despite domestic controversy, Tokyo reinterpreted its constitution to allow for "out of area missions" and deployed a contingent of troops to Iraq, the first such mission into a combat zone since World War II. Tokyo's recently revised defense policy broke new ground by specifically naming China and North Korea as key threats to Japan's security.

Japan triggered a strong Chinese response when it joined with the US in a joint statement defining a resolution to the Taiwan issue as a "common strategic objective." It was interpreted as the first Japanese foray into security issues beyond its immediate periphery and was lambasted by Beijing as interference in China's internal affairs.

Japan's neighbors are, of course, less sanguine about Tokyo's intentions and warn of resurgent Japanese militarism. Japanese territorial disputes over the Tokdo/Takeshima, Diaoyu/Senkaku, and Kurile Islands have strained Tokyo's relations with South Korea, China, and Russia respectively. Moreover, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and controversies over Japanese textbook depictions of World War II have generated intense nationalist backlash against Tokyo's perceived failure to atone for wartime atrocities. The Chinese leadership interprets the US outreach to Japan as part of an effort to encircle China.

South Korea Cast Adrift

. Seoul, always nervous about its relationship with the US especially vis-à-vis Japan, saw Rice's support for a Japanese UNSC seat as a further sign of its diminishing relationship with Washington. Rice's comments, coming in the midst of the bitter Tokdo island dispute, are particularly galling to Seoul since it had specifically withheld its support as potential leverage on future Japanese behavior.

Bilateral US-South Korean relations were severely tested during the 2002 South Korean presidential campaign and have ebbed and flowed during the Roh Moo-hyun Administration. Roh's foreign

independent policy initiatives continue to irk US officials. His speeches at a Los Angeles think-tank and the South Korean Air Force Academy commencement ran strongly counter to US policy and appeared designed to aggravate the Bush Administration. Seoul's actions have resulted in South Korea being again isolated in northeast Asia and surrounded by larger powers or, to use the oft-quoted Korean adage, "a shrimp amongst whales."

President Roh, however, perceives South Korea as operating from a position of power. During commencement ceremonies at the Korea Third Military Academy on 22 March, Roh claimed that the power structure in East Asia will shift depending on the choices that South Korea makes. The president defined the country's new role as a "stabilizer for peace and prosperity not just on the Korean Peninsula, but in East Asia as a whole."

South Korean officials told the Choson Ilbo that Seoul will not be cornered into an exclusive alliance with Washington and that the current paradigm with South Korea playing one leg of a three-way alliance with the US and Japan was an outdated product of the Cold War. South Korea would, instead, choose sides on an issue-by-issue basis. Roh's remarks will further alienate Washington and reinforce US perceptions that he is working against common objectives to redress security threats.

North Korea Reaps the Benefits

. Pyongyang will calibrate its strategy to take advantage of the divisive political landscape and seek to further isolate the US from South Korea and Japan from South Korea. Pyongyang has repeatedly appealed to Seoul through a shared sense of "Korean-ness" on issues and supported South Korean positions on territorial disputes with China and Japan.

Such efforts collectively undermine US objectives to present a unified negotiating position to Pyongyang as well as any future attempts to garner international support for stronger measures. China and South Korea would strongly resist US attempts to bring the North Korean nuclear issue before the UNSC. Recent US media reports that the Bush Administration politicized intelligence reporting on North Korean export of uranium to Libya will only heighten suspicions over US claims on Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities or intentions.

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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