

Policy Forum 09-061: UN Sanctions Unlikely to Make North Korean Back Down

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By Liu Ming

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I. Introduction

Liu Ming, deputy director of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, writes, "If, as seems to be the case, the North Korean leadership is entering a transitional period, the new leader will face a strategic dilemma: whether to continue promoting

denuclearization at the cost of worsening the economic situation. In the end, the final choice will be up to North Korea's elite and people."

II. Article by Liu Ming

- "UN Sanctions Unlikely to Make North Korean Back Down"

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The United Nations Security Council imposed new sanctions, including travel bans and an assets freeze, on five North Korean individuals and five organizations on July 16. Those named include two senior officials of the North Korean General Bureau of Atomic Energy, the former director of the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center, and two directors of trading companies involved in North Korea's missile program.

Since North Korea carried out a missile test on April 24, the UN has frozen the foreign assets of eight North Korean companies and banks. The Security Council sanctions committee also announced a ban on shipments of two sensitive materials, graphite for electrical discharge machines, and para-aramid fiber.

The latest sanctions were implemented under Security Council Resolution 1874, which passed unanimously on June 12. The Security Council showed its concern regarding the Korean nuclear issue by announcing the details of the sanctions less than 30 days later. There is no doubt that governments and banks worldwide will implement the mandate to curb North Korea's trade in weapons of mass destruction and related technology. Even North Korea's long-term trading partners will cut transactions to avoid incurring sanctions from the U.S. and the UN. This will strike a potentially crushing blow to North Korea's trade and finance.

But North Korea's deputy ambassador to the UN Pak Tok Hun said his country "will not accept Security Council resolutions against the North Korea and any sanctions under the resolutions." North Korea was expecting the sanctions resolution to pass and remains bent on becoming a nuclear-weapons state at all costs. Its strategic plan is to first resolve the technical problems of weaponizing nuclear devices, miniaturizing nuclear warheads, and perfecting a missile with a range of over 6,000 kilometers. To achieve this it will need to carry out three to five nuclear tests and missile launches over the next one to two years. Only then does it intend to sit down and talk with the U.S. on freezing nuclear and ballistic missile development.

The international community should be aware of North Korea's strategic ambition. On his recent visit to East Asia, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell said that if Pyongyang took "irreversible" steps to disarmament, other countries, including the U.S., would offer a "comprehensive package" to bring North Korea back into talks. His remarks indicate that, on the one hand, the U.S. still cherishes the illusion of realizing denuclearization of North Korea by paying compensation to Pyongyang; on the other hand, the U.S. and its allies lack an effective alternative strategy on the issue. Enticing North Korea back to talks seems to be their only option.

The North Korean military dominated the country's decision-making on the nuclear development program during the most recent negotiations with Bush Administration at the end of last year. The military's evaluation of the negotiations is likely to have been that acceptance of the third-phase denuclearization proposed by the U.S. would mean opening up the country, a diplomatic and military retreat and giving up efforts to become a nuclear-weapons state and a great power by 2012. It would eventually turn North Korea into a dependency of the United States.

At present, Pyongyang is not over-nervous about UN sanctions. Companies can change their names and acquire technology and materials by smuggling. Officials have no overseas deposits and are not affected by an assets freeze. They can continue visits to Syria and Iran on direct flights between the countries. But with the U.S. blocking shipboard trade in line with the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), gradually-tightening financial sanctions, and the implementation of the joint sanctions on economic aid and financial transactions by China and Russia, North Korea's economy and its nuclear program will undoubtedly become stuck in a deep mire. Nobody can be optimistic about its future.

If, as seems to be the case, the North Korean leadership is entering a transitional period, the new leader will face a strategic dilemma: whether to continue promoting denuclearization at the cost of worsening the economic situation. In the end, the final choice will be up to North Korea's elite and people. The international community can only create an environment, but cannot make the choice for 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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