

Policy Forum 08-062: Vietnam's Model for North Korea



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By Michael E. O'Hanlon

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I. Introduction

Michael E. O'Hanlon, Senior Foreign Policy Fellow at the Brookings Institution, writes, "Our real carrots are not taking North Korea off terrorism and enemy watch lists; doing so provides little direct benefit to the reclusive regime. The carrots are aid, trade, investment and diplomatic contact. We need a strategy for how to offer these enticements to leaders in Pyongyang."

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II. Article by Michael E. O'Hanlon

- "Vietnam's Model for North Korea"

By Michael E. O'Hanlon

Is peace breaking out with North Korea? Just last month, North Korea presented China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the United States with a declaration itemizing its nuclear capabilities. High on the list was the admission that North Korea had six to eight bombs' worth of plutonium, most of it reprocessed into usable form over the past five years. In response, President Bush said he intends to remove North Korea from the terrorism list maintained by the U.S. government and to waive restrictions imposed for decades via the Trading with the Enemy Act.

After years of dickering, this progress is certainly good news, but we are hardly out of the woods. North Korea is mum about whether it has a second means of developing fissile material and about whether it helped countries such as Syria pursue nuclear ambitions. On the plutonium issue itself, North Korea has only begun to admit what it has. That is a far cry from actually giving up the material. This deal makes sense as an interim step, but it doesn't tell us what to do next.

This nation needs less debate about current tactics in dealing with North Korea and more focus on a broader strategy. Such a recalibration would make it easier to place tactical disagreements in perspective and perhaps even move toward some limited national consensus on how to handle what could again become a severe crisis.

Vietnam's evolution

The key is to focus on basic change in North Korea. What might a reformed North Korea look like? Vietnam today. That former U.S. enemy has restructured its economy and begun to open its society and politics while retaining communism as official dogma. The process started in the 1980s and accelerated thereafter, culminating in normalization of ties in the Clinton era. Vietnam's annual economic growth averaged just 2.6% in the '70s, but 3.6% in the '80s and more than 7% since then. Today, North Korea is about where Vietnam was in the late 1970s. That is not a great place to be, but the analogy leaves room for hope.

To be sure, it would be wonderful if North Korean leaders would simply reject communism. But that's about as likely as leader Kim Jong Il giving up his luxury cars and cognac. The good news is that they (and he) need not. Vietnam has proved that a more gradual path to reform can work for all concerned, including the U.S. and its regional allies.

With this idea in mind, the U.S. should make clear to North Korea that generous aid with investment and trade awaits - but only to the extent North Korea is serious about reform. The U.S. should go beyond the nuclear issue and urge North Korea to make deep cuts in conventional forces, eliminate chemical weaponry and ballistic missiles over time and improve human rights policies. As these things happen, the U.S. could open the flow of aid and trade while encouraging others to do the same (primarily in direct assistance, not cash, since North Korean leaders tend to pocket the latter). If Pyongyang refuses, we then might have an easier time persuading other countries to again increase the pressure on North Korea until it realizes it has no real alternative.

For those inclined to wince at the idea of negotiating with a Stalinist regime, everything can be

gradual and verifiable. Some steps can be codified in treaties; others can be less formal. Of course, the critical issue is the plutonium, since a nuclear weapon could destroy Seoul, possibly Tokyo or maybe even a U.S. city. That should still be the focus, but not at the risk of missing the broader picture.

Some might ask why the U.S. would complicate the elimination of North Korea's plutonium by raising other issues. The reason is simple: The U.S. gets caught in a Catch-22 if it focuses only on plutonium. North Korea knows that its bomb-making materials are the only reason the world pays attention to such a forlorn, poor, small country. So it will not be likely to give up such materials unless the compensation is exorbitant. (Nothing about its recent declaration commits it to a specific denuclearization path.) Yet we can't buy up the plutonium without giving in to what would in effect be extortion.

Go bigger

What to do, then? As President Eisenhower said, "If you have a problem that cannot be solved, enlarge it." In this case, focusing on the broader North Korean reform agenda might be easier than on denuclearization alone. We cannot allow ourselves to be forced to buy out its plutonium stocks, but we can help North Korea reform more comprehensively. Justifying aid to achieve greater reforms is an easier sell than making a payoff for plutonium. Besides, such fundamental changes inside North Korea would help its long-suffering people while planting the seeds for an economic revival and future reforms. (Case in point: Vietnam.)

Our real carrots are not taking North Korea off terrorism and enemy watch lists; doing so provides little direct benefit to the reclusive regime. The carrots are aid, trade, investment and diplomatic contact. We need a strategy for how to offer these enticements to leaders in Pyongyang. The current debate over tactics obscures this core challenge; it is time for us to stretch our imaginations and think strategically instead. And when the negotiations get particularly difficult - and they will - it's worth remembering that as with Vietnam, the fruits of patience are sometimes worth the wait.

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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