Policy Forum 06-78A: Wabbit in Free Fall

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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 06-78A: Wabbit in Free Fall", NAPSNet Policy Forum, September 21, 2006, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/wabbit-in-free-fall/

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Policy Forum Online 06-78A: September 21st, 2006
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Essay by Robert Carlin

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I. Introduction

Robert Carlin, former Chief of the Northeast Asia Division in INR at the State Department, presented this hypothetical speech emulating DPRK First Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju to a meeting of North Korean diplomats. This was not a real speech by the DPRK official, but an article Carlin wrote assuming the perspective of the Vice Foreign Minister. Carlin writes, "On the nuclear question, the guidance is quite clear and you will stick to it, no matter how often you are pestered. Whether or not we will test is not for us to know. I can tell you this-the situation in Pyongyang is where we never wanted it to be. We have no standing at all, no weight, no credibility any longer to

influence the decision."

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. Essay by Robert Carlin

- Wabbit in Free Fall
by Robert Carlin

When the idea for this conference first came up, Richard Bush suggested I emulate William Safire and channel Kim Jong Il for you.

I gave this some thought but decided it showed a lot of chutzpah-I mean, doing Kim, not Safire.

I was mulling how to proceed when, a few days ago, I received an envelope postmarked Prague.

In it were notes-wrapped in oilskin and nearly verbatim as far as I can tell--from a speech given by First Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju to a meeting of North Korean diplomats held in Pyongyang over the summer.

Please do not ask who sent it to me.

I can tell you the document is handwritten, in Korean. I was not able to finish the translation, so in parts I may have to pause to do it on the spot.

My Korean, as some of you may know, is not very good, but I think it will suffice for this morning.

I hope the same can be said for my English.

Now, to begin with the Vice Minister's presentation:

Comrades,

It is good to gather with so many trusted colleagues again after so long.

Those of you who have been away will find that I am old and at last tired of wrestling with the same problems over and over.

This may be my last address to a meeting of this type. I will therefore be candid with you and trust you will listen with open minds.

Let me begin with a personal insight.

An ignorance so profound, an amnesia so deep and pervasive has settled over Washington that there appears no chance of ever returning to the constructive path the two countries were on for more than a decade, from 1991 through 2002.

The problem is not so much where things are today. It is, instead, what has been lost over the past several years.

The direction events have moved is weird, almost impossible to grasp, and it is important for those of you who are new, or have been asleep for the past six years, to understand what has occurred.

Walking the halls in the Ministry, I sometimes hear groups of younger officers debating how we are to get out of the current difficulties. I would feel better, and have more confidence in their conclusions, if I knew they had real understanding of how we got here in the first place.

Let me briefly review our efforts and the outlines of policy.

I say briefly because I see we have a tour of the Pueblo at noon. (At this point the notes remark that low groans are heard from the audience)

Kang continues:

In 1991, our President saw the strategic danger confronting us after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. He instructed that, on a priority basis, this Ministry work to improve relations with the United States.

We had two primary concerns, with which you are all familiar:

FIRST--to guard against dangers to our sovereignty and independence from Russia and China, by gradually moving to circumstances in which US forces could remain in the southern half of the peninsula but in a non-threatening way.

SECOND--the purpose thus of improving the external security environment was to enable us to turn our attention to restoring the economy.

Those were our goals.

They remained our goals for ten years.

I cannot tell you today that they still are our goals because, frankly, I no longer know.

In any case, it is the reason we worked so diligently to achieve the Agreed Framework of October 1994.

While in Geneva, with the negotiations nearly complete, the Americans asked if we would fulfill our final obligations in the future, when the time came.

I gave them an answer that surprised them-at least, those that were paying attention.

I said that it depended on the circumstances. I said that if by 2003 or so the political sections of the framework had been fulfilled (the notes show there is raucous laughter at this point in the audience, causing Kang to pause) …IF the political steps had been taken and transformed the political and security environment, then, I said, the leadership of the DPRK would be faced with an entirely new and different set of choices embedded in a new reality.

I have always believed that our nature, as a small and weak country, is and must be essentially pragmatic; I believed then that we would decide on that basis, though I knew the difficulties confronting us.

Or, at least I thought I did at the time.

After the Agreed Framework was signed, we went through four phases.

FIRST, from 1995-2000: Complete the foundations for improving relations with the US. Beginning in early 2000, pressures from General Kim became constant to accomplish this in order to prepare for

his new economic measures that were in the works.

SECOND, from 2001-2002, "Protect and Defend." This I would have to say was a period of miserable failure for the Ministry, and criticism from the leadership got sharper and more severe. Not only could we not hold onto the gains from the previous years, we couldn't even engage Washington anymore.

And so we came to the THIRD phase, from 2002-2004, the SLIPPERY SLOPE.

FINALLY, we are here, in what I call the "Mr. Kurtz, he dead," phase. Some of you may recall I told the Americans my favorite book was Gone with the Wind but that was untrue; actually, I most enjoy The Heart of Darkness.

Let me now review in more detail the prominent features of the dismal landscape that traces the path down to our present low point:

I read recently that the White House Press secretary-his name is Fog or Snow or something inclement-said Clinton's emissaries had come to our country with flowers and chocolates.

I certainly don't remember getting any of either. If any of you did, please report them on your contact forms immediately.

Let me begin on a high point, why not?

October 2000

Vice Chairman Jo Myong Rok went to Washington, and I was fortunate enough to accompany him.

At the end of the visit, the vice chairman issued a joint communiqué. The Americans had given us a draft almost a year ahead of time, and we could have engaged them on it at any point. We should have done so earlier, I am convinced. But never mind.

Vice Chairman Jo returned home, and two weeks after that Secretary of State Albright arrived.

Much of the symbolism of that visit seemed to go over the heads of the Americans.

General Kim's appearance at the mass games with Albright was sadly mishandled by Washington; why do they think the General would want to be seen standing next to the American Secretary of State in front of all of our people if not to show them that we were no longer eternal enemies?

Why do they think we kept the Chinese Defense Minister cooling his heels until Albright left?

And why did two US fight planes invade our airspace on the day she left Pyongyang? It took me days to calm the army down after that.

In November came the elections and in January a new administration. In January, we sent a number of positive signals to Washington, against the advice of many of you in the Ministry as well as in other agencies, who argued we were just showing weakness.

This was, as you will recall, the same time General Kim visited Shanghai, among other things meant to show to the Americans how our domestic course was being altered in light of positive developments in DPRK-US relations.

April 2001--by now, tempers growing short in Pyongyang as we had no response to our signals, other

than observing how the Secretary of State's legs cut out from under him.

That should have been a lesson to us; we could not believe that a former military man, a general, could be treated so cavalierly by the civilians.

We reminded Washington of the missile deal on the table. No response. There was a concerted push from other agencies to drop the notion that US forces should remain on the peninsula.

By this time, I had rumblings in my stomach telling me something was seriously wrong.

For one thing, the New York channel had been essentially severed by Washington. In truth, this bothered me as much as anything we heard from Washington.

The New York channel had been our secret weapon-not against the Americans but against obstacles of many kinds.

- It let us short circuit criticism here in the capital,
- It let us float new ideas without full vetting,
- And it helped the Americans see around roadblocks in their own thinking.

By summer it became nothing than a mail slot, and not a very good one. There was a lot of grumbling about how much money that post was eating up of our budget. Eventually we could not justify the personnel expenses and were ordered to cut the staff in New York.

During the spring and summer of 2001, we made it as clear as we could to the Americans that we wanted to meet with members of the new administration, not those we'd dealt with in the past, but the new people, to establish personal contact.

The best we got was a green member of the NSC.

What we needed from Washington was some positive reference, however indirect, to the October 2000 Joint Communique. Vice Marshal Cho had gone to Washington and signed it, it could not simply be consigned to the trash heap. It didn't have to be explicitly reaffirmed, certainly not in its entirety, but we needed something, something, anything.

After the attacks of September 11 2001, we sent condolences-not once but twice. We thought for sure, in all the focus on terrorism, the Americans would recall we had issued a joint statement with them pledging cooperation in the fight against international terrorism. But no, there was nothing.

Early in 2002, even after the famous "axis of evil" speech and the Nuclear Policy Review, we engaged, hoping for talks in the spring, summer, then again in the autumn. In July 2002, General Kim decided with or without the Americans on board, it was past time to launch his economic measures-some of us advised that this would surely elicit positive response from the Americans.

In August 2002, John Bolton gave a speech in Seoul. We knew who Bolton was and what he was up to. He was a rhetorical free fire zone for us, but we toned down our response, getting ready for what we thought would be a return to positive engagement. Also in August came the first pouring of concrete at the LW site in Kumho. Some of us argued that it proved we had been right in keeping this KEDO channel open.

We kept that channel open, and continued to do so through 2005, against the advice and I must say constant carping of many in other departments. We continued to abide by that thick volume of

protocols signed with KEDO as a means of signaling there was still a place to resume progress toward improving relations.

I can't be sure how many KEDO delegations visited for talks from 2002 until the last ship carrying them away pulled out of the harbor in January 2006. We kept waiting and waiting for Washington to utilize that channel. There was only silence.

And then, of course, came the start of the Slippery Slope, the visit by James Kelly in October 2002.

Never have I seen such miscalculation and awkward use of the tools of diplomacy. We were fairly sure the Americans would bring up the HEU issue. Reports of numerous public meetings in the US, as well as the remarks by numerous American officials, made it clear that would be on the agenda.

We calculated, however, that the meeting would follow the operating practices the two sides had worked out in the past for dealing with contentious issues, allowing the statement of views and then leaving the way open to explore a route to resolution.

Nothing of the sort took place. There was no sense of diplomacy. We were given a rude ultimatum, a scolding, a challenge, and that was that.

Three months after the Great General had launched his economic reforms on the assumptions things would improve with the US, everything collapsed. Needless to say, he was not pleased.

In an effort to repair things, not long after I passed a message from the Great General to Bush through Gregg and Oberdorfer.

We heard nothing, or perhaps I should say, the answer seemed to be a KEDO meeting at which heavy fuel oil was suspended, followed immediately-within hours, as I recall--by a statement from Bush.

We could not but respond in the logic of Agreed Framework. The HFO was the quid pro quo for the freeze at Yongbyon. Without the HFO, the freeze would be lifted, much to the delight of certain agencies.

In January 2003 came the NPT withdrawal. Thereafter, those agencies with a timetable put it into motion, and methodically followed it.

In March 2003 came the Air Force escapade, when three of our fighter planes went out to kiss a US recon aircraft. I never saw so many drunken Air Force officers in my life, at which point I knew they had succeeded. We held our breath waiting for a response that never came. I knew at that point the jig was probably up for the diplomatic track.

After the quick victory in Iraq there were some long faces, but the army perked up again as soon as they determined that the Americans would be bogged down in Iraq and not be able to turn their attention elsewhere.

Finally, in February 2005 came the declaration that we possessed nuclear weapons.

From 1995-2000, altogether, we had something like 20 different sets of negotiations going on with the US. I barely had personnel to staff the talks and support work. Since 2001, we have had virtually nothing.

Some of you will say, what about six party talks? Six party talks were never real, they were hopeless

from the start, never a serious effort by Washington to utilize diplomacy, they were simply an effort by the Americans to corral us, like cattle. Worse, six party talks were chasing us directly into the arms of the Chinese, which is the last place we imagined the Americans would want us to be.

The Joint Statement of Sept 2005 was drafted entirely by the Chinese, it was gutted when Ambassador Hill stood up the next day and said, in so many words, LWRs were completely off the table.

It would be nice to blame the Americans for everything, but we made errors of our own. We made many mistakes; these we must recognize and contemplate seriously.

We waited too long, too long in 2000 to engage Washington at a high level. That gap was largely against the advice of this Ministry, but it was our failure.

We failed because we never imagined the roots of what was accomplished were so shallow; we never imagined how quickly all that had been accomplished could be discarded.

People say our policy is subject to sudden change; none of us could believe how quickly American policy turned 180 degrees. Those of us who counseled patience have been left naked.

For all the books and TV watching and talking to people, we weren't prepared for what began in January 2001.

We failed to see how the face of diplomacy would be altered and how our interlocutors would arrive at the table bound and gagged, surround on all sides by watchers.

No one fore saw that, actually, and I do not fault you comrades personally for shortsightedness.

Our constant hope, stretched thinner and thinner over time, was that the Americans would come to their senses.

Some of you thought that the appointment of Ambassador Hill marked a turning point and that the ship would gradually right itself. But what he needed from us was more than we could possibly give without a better sense that he could really deliver.

How often we heard from the Americans that if we would just give a little to the pro-engagement forces, they could use that to strengthen their position. How could they fail to see that the situation was no different here?

As for the present situation, there is probably no hope of going back. We are a nuclear power and there is no reason we should, nor any likelihood we could, give that up.

Pressures for continued development of the nuclear deterrence is overwhelming, and the logic of pouring more money and resources into that program is impossible to defeat, mindless though it may be.

At every step, those who wanted to proceed have had the upper hand.

They have had a timetable, and they have stuck with it since 2002.

If we could have stopped the process at 5 or 6 weapons, perhaps we would have had a way to step back down again. I am not sure where the threshold of no return is, but we are getting close.

We have no standing anymore in our own policy circles, as the ground has been cut out from under

us completely. Those in Washington who were part of the constructive period have been purged, those that remained proved feckless.

The nation will survive and the memory of our struggle will not be forgotten, though it may soon be soaked in the blood of innocents.

The greatest victories are those won without firing a shot, and that must be our goal.

But we are running out of choices, and I fear those who have counseled strength may in the end prove correct.

If we do not confront the Americans with strength, we may soon have to fight them in our cities, in our mountains, on the banks of our rivers again. It is true that the only thing they seem to understand is the logic of force.

Looking ahead, we cannot anymore save Washington from itself. And I am not sure there is any longer room to wait this out.

Our goals will remain unchanged:

1. There will be no foreign dominance of our country;
2. We must position ourselves against Japanese;
3. We will sustain the leadership generation to generation

The floods in July were bad, but we will get by, as we always do. The economy is picking up, nothing grand but enough for the moment.

On the nuclear question, the guidance is quite clear and you will stick to it, no matter how often you are pestered. Whether or not we will test is not for us to know. I can tell you this-the situation in Pyongyang is where we never wanted it to be. We have no standing at all, no weight, no credibility any longer to influence the decision.

Some of you are having trouble cashing checks, I hear. Do your best.

As I said, from a walk around the city, you'll see that the economy has picked up some from a few years ago, though nothing like we'd hoped. Your job is still to encourage foreign investment. (groans and laughter from the audience).

On a positive note, I can tell you that the American vice president was voted unanimously a member of the National Defense Committee at the song fest, to much drunken back slapping.

Comrades,

In Washington in October 2000, staying at a hotel, called I think the Flower of May -- a rather pretty name -- turned on the TV and there were children's cartoons.

One was of a rabbit, I remember quite well, he had run over cliff, and was running in mid air. All was fine until he made a fatal mistake.

The rabbit looked down.

I wish you comrades a pleasant stay in the capital, joyous reunion with your loved ones, and a safe

journey back to your posts.

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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