Policy Forum 07-009: What North Korea Really Wants

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Article by Robert Carlin and John W. Lewis

CONTENTS

I. Introduction

II. Article by Robert Carlin and John W. Lewis

III. Nautilus invites your responses

I. Introduction

Robert Carlin, a former State Department analyst who participated in most of the U.S.-North Korea negotiations between 1993 and 2000, and John Lewis, professor emeritus at Stanford University who directs projects on Asia at the university's Center for International Security and Cooperation, write, "Denuclearization, if still achievable, can come only when North Korea sees its strategic problem solved, and that, in its view, can happen only when relations with the United States improve."

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the U.S. Government.

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II. Article by Robert Carlin and John W. Lewis

- What North Korea Really Wants
by Robert Carlin and John W. Lewis

Those who think that dealing with North Korea is impossible are wrong. Unfortunately, those who think that it is, in fact, possible to deal with North Korea often are not much closer to the truth. The basic problem is that people of both views simply haven't figured out what it is that the North really wants.

We tend to confuse North Korea's short-term tactical goals with its broader strategic focus. We draw up list after list of things we think might appeal to Pyongyang on the assumption that these will constitute a "leveraged buyout," finally achieving what we want: the total, irreversible denuclearization of North Korea.

But this list of "carrots" (energy, food, the lifting of sanctions) does not include what the North thinks it must have. It can, of course, help keep the process on track and moving ahead, and it could help cement a final deal and hold it together through the inevitable political storms. But these things are not the ends that North Korea seeks.

North Korea feeds our misperceptions by bargaining so hard over details and raising its initial demands so high. For our part, we tend to be taken in by Western journalists' repetition of stock phrases about it being "one of the poorest nations," "one of the most isolated," "living on handouts." Accurate or not, these factors are irrelevant to Pyongyang's strategic calculations.

Those who realize that North Korea does not have visions of grand rewards sometimes move the focus to political steps that many see as "key" to a solution. These include replacing the armistice with a peace treaty, giving the North security guarantees, discussing plans for an exchange of diplomats. But these, like the economic carrots, are only shimmering, imperfect reflections of what Pyongyang is after.

What is it, then, that North Korea wants? Above all, it wants, and has pursued steadily since 1991, a long-term, strategic relationship with the United States. This has nothing to do with ideology or political philosophy. It is a cold, hard calculation based on history and the realities of geopolitics as perceived in Pyongyang. The North Koreans believe in their gut that they must buffer the heavy influence their neighbors already have, or could soon gain, over their small, weak country.

This is hard for Americans to understand, having read or heard nothing from North Korea except its propaganda, which for years seems to have called for weakening, not maintaining, the U.S. presence on the Korean Peninsula. But in fact an American departure is the last thing the North wants. Because of their pride and fear of appearing weak, however, explicitly requesting that the United States stay is one of the most difficult things for the North Koreans to do.

If the United States has leverage, it is not in its ability to supply fuel oil or grain or paper promises of nonhostility. The leverage rests in Washington's ability to convince Pyongyang of its commitment to coexist with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, accept its system and leadership, and make room for the DPRK in an American vision of the future of Northeast Asia. Quite simply, the North Koreans believe they could be useful to the United States in a longer, larger balance-of-power

game against China and Japan. The Chinese know this and say so in private.

The fundamental problem for North Korea is that the six-party talks in which it has been engaged -- and which may reconvene soon -- are a microcosm of the strategic world it most fears. Three strategic foes -- China, Japan and Russia -- sit in judgment, apply pressure and (to Pyongyang's mind) insist on the North's permanent weakness.

Denuclearization, if still achievable, can come only when North Korea sees its strategic problem solved, and that, in its view, can happen only when relations with the United States improve. For Pyongyang, that is the essence of the joint statement out of the six-party talks on Sept. 19, 2005, which included this sentence: "The DPRK and the United States undertook to respect each other's sovereignty, exist peacefully together, and take steps to normalize their relations subject to their respective bilateral policies."

And that is why the North so doggedly seeks bilateral talks with Washington. It desires not "drive-by" encounters, not a meeting here and there, but serious, sustained talks in which ideas can be explored and solutions, at last, patiently developed.

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
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)
Return to top
back to top

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org