Policy Forum 09-017: What Obama Should Offer North Korea

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What Obama Should Offer North Korea

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By Leon V. Sigal

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I. Introduction

Leon V. Sigal, Director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council, writes, "Pyongyang's basic stance is that as long as Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul remain adversaries, it feels threatened and will acquire nuclear weapons and missiles to counter that threat. But, it says, if Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo move toward reconciliation, it will get rid of these weapons. Whether North Korea means what it says isn't certain, but the only way to test it is to try to build mutual trust over time by faithfully carrying out a series of reciprocal steps that starts now."

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II. Article by Leon V. Sigal

- "What Obama Should Offer North Korea"
By Leon V. Sigal

As if President Barack Obama hasn't inherited enough trouble from his predecessor, nuclear negotiations with North Korea are once again headed for trouble. In return for energy aid, North Korea agreed at the latest round of Six-Party Talks in December 2008 to complete the disabling of its plutonium program. The Bush administration, however, insisted that the disablement be verified--moving the goalposts beyond what the six parties had previously agreed to do. A couple of months earlier, North Korea had made an oral pledge to Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill to allow sampling and other verification measures. But without a quid pro quo, which the Bush administration wouldn't provide, Pyongyang refused to put it in writing. In response, Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo threatened to suspend the scheduled shipments of energy aid they had pledged to Pyongyang, reneging on the October 2007 Six-Party agreement.

This is nothing new. Whenever the United States fails to keep its side of the bargain, North Korea is quick to retaliate--in 1998 Pyongyang sought the means to enrich uranium and test a long-range Taepodong missile; in 2003 it reignited its plutonium program; in 2006 it test-launched a Taepodong and conducted a nuclear test; and last August it suspended disablement of its Yongbyon facilities and threatened to resume plutonium production. History shows that trying to get something for nothing from North Korea doesn't work. In fact, pressuring Pyongyang yields nothing but trouble.

As if Washington moving the goalposts wasn't trouble enough, North Korea has been stepping up its demands, insisting that it won't give up its nuclear weapons unless the U.S. "nuclear umbrella" over South Korea is removed. Pyongyang has also hinted that it wants "all other nuclear weapons states" to disarm when it disarms.

To change the dynamic, the Obama administration needs to propose a comprehensive menu of sequenced reciprocal actions to end enmity and reconcile with North Korea, easing its isolation and insecurity. In return for a new political, economic, and strategic relationship with Washington, Pyongyang needs to agree to satisfy international norms of behavior, starting with steps to halt exports of nuclear and missile technology--along with nuclear and missile tests--and then move to eliminate its nuclear and missile programs.

Here are a series of quid pro quos that I believe will inspire a more productive and sustainable give-and-take:

- After consulting with South Korea and Japan, the Obama administration should promptly send a high-level emissary, perhaps former President Bill Clinton or former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, to Pyongyang to offer a little more for a little more. For example, that emissary could reaffirm the promise to deliver energy assistance in return for North Korea completing the disablement of its plutonium facilities and disposal of replacement fuel rods.
- The emissary could also promise to provide additional energy aid in return for North Korea's acceptance of a written agreement on verification

- To induce a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests and an agreement on dismantlement, the emissary should offer to begin a peace process on the Korean peninsula with a declaration signed by Washington, Pyongyang, South Korea, and China. In that declaration, the United States would reaffirm that it has no hostile intent toward Pyongyang and formally commit itself to signing a peace treaty that ends the Korean War when North Korea is nuclear-free.

After further consultation with South Korea and Japan, the United States should offer a lot more for a lot more:

- Deepen economic engagement with agricultural, energy, and infrastructure aid to encourage dismantlement of North Korean nuclear facilities and an agreement to dismantle its medium- and long-range missiles and missile programs.
- Move to establish full diplomatic relations as Pyongyang dismantles its fuel-fabrication plant, reprocessing facility, and reactor at Yongbyon with Nunn-Lugar funding; carries out the verification of its plutonium production; adopts a plan for verification of its enrichment and proliferation activities; and holds talks with the United Nations on human rights.
- Commence a regional security dialogue that would provide North Korea with a formal commitment not to use nuclear weapons against it once Pyongyang is completely nuclear-free.
- Begin constructing conventional power plants as North Korea dismantles its nuclear programs and begins to turn over its nuclear material and weapons.
- Complete the construction of the power plants, perhaps including a replacement nuclear reactor, and sign a peace treaty once Pyongyang gives up all of its nuclear material and weapons.
- Hold a summit meeting with Kim Jong-il in return for North Korea disposing some of its plutonium--at a minimum the spent nuclear fuel removed during the disablement process. At that meeting, conclude agreement on the above road map, which would then be subject to Six-Party approval.

By getting Kim Jong-il's signature on such a deal, Obama would give Pyongyang a tangible stake in becoming nuclear-free. It would also give Washington its first real leverage: U.S. steps could be withheld or reversed if--and only if--Pyongyang doesn't follow through on its commitments.

Now, can Obama offer such a deal? Elections seldom give U.S. presidents a mandate to do much of anything, but the case of nuclear diplomacy with North Korea is an exception because of the 2008 presidential campaign. As a candidate, Obama advocated "direct and aggressive diplomacy with North Korea that can yield results, while not ceding our leverage in negotiations unless it is clear that North Korea is living up to its obligations." He specifically included holding direct talks with Kim Jong-il.

Several Obama aides believe that a crucial moment in the campaign came after a July 2007 Democratic Primary debate when Obama was asked, "Would you be willing to meet separately, without preconditions, during the first year of your administration, in Washington or anywhere else, with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea, in order to bridge the gap that divides our countries?" Obama's answer was simple: "I would."

His rival, Hillary Clinton, pounced on the remark, calling it hopelessly naďve, and her campaign prepared to emphasize what appeared to be a winning argument. The Obama campaign had much the same reaction. In a November 2008 New Yorker article, an Obama aide recalled a conference call that took place the following morning: "We know this is going to be the issue of the day. We have the sense they're going to come after us on it. And we're all on the bus trying to figure out how to get out of it, how not to talk about it." Obama, who heard that part of the conversation, took the

telephone from an aide and instructed his staff not to back down: "This is ridiculous. We met with Stalin. We met with Mao. The idea that we can't meet with Ahmadinejad is ridiculous. This is a bunch of Washington-insider conventional wisdom that makes no sense. We should not run from this debate. We should have it."

Obama also held firm when Republican presidential nominee John McCain attacked his stance during the first presidential debate, saying that the president should "certainly not sit down across the table--without precondition, as Senator Obama said twice. I mean, it's just dangerous." While McCain questioned Bush's decision to delist North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism, Obama gave it conditional approval according to a June 2008 campaign statement: "Sanctions are a critical part of our leverage to pressure North Korea to act. They should only be lifted based on North Korean performance. If the North Koreans do not meet their obligations, we should move quickly to re-impose sanctions that have been waived and consider new restrictions going forward."

As president, however, Obama will be preoccupied with the economic crisis and will have to depend on appointees with the courage of his convictions. Thus, the question remains, will he be willing to expend the political capital to deal with North Korea, challenging the reigning orthodoxy in Washington and the irreconcilables in Congress?

Similarly, he could be constrained by the leaders of regional allies such as Japan and South Korea. For instance, Tokyo and Seoul are divided between conservative realists who, though skeptical, are willing to give negotiations a try and right-wingers who prefer to live with the North Korean threat than to improve relations with Pyongyang.

Recent Japanese governments have wavered between pressing the United States to negotiate and doing their utmost to impede the Six-Party Talks. Current Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso has taken the latter course, but he may not survive the upcoming election. A coalition government under his opponent, Ichiro Ozawa, may be more forthcoming because Ozawa will want to improve relations with all of Japan's near neighbors.

In South Korea, President Lee Myung-bak came to power determined to show he was tougher than his predecessors, which has only led North Korea to dig in its heels and stall North-South reconciliation. Still, Lee may come around to pursuing diplomacy with North Korea. To do otherwise would run the risk of lagging behind while the United States makes rapid progress in its relations with North Korea.

Pyongyang's basic stance is that as long as Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul remain adversaries, it feels threatened and will acquire nuclear weapons and missiles to counter that threat. But, it says, if Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo move toward reconciliation, it will get rid of these weapons. Whether North Korea means what it says isn't certain, but the only way to test it is to try to build mutual trust over time by faithfully carrying out a series of reciprocal steps that starts now.

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