

Cuba 1962 and North Korea Now

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Article by Leon V. Sigal

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I. Introduction

Leon V. Sigal., director of the Northeast Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council in New York and author of *"Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea"*, writes, "Will President Bush give Kim Jong-il -- and himself -- a similar face-saving way out? He could start by urging banks that have frozen North Korea's hard currency accounts to release the proceeds of its legitimate trade and then engage in sustained diplomatic give-and take for a change."

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II. Article by Leon V. Sigal

- Cuba 1962 and North Korea Now

by Leon V. Sigal

In response to North Korea's nuclear test, the Bush administration is now pursuing a two-track approach. On one track, it did what it needed to do to resume six-party talks. At an October 31 meeting hosted by China in Beijing, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill negotiated directly with his North Korean counterpart, Kim Gye-gwan. "They made very clear that these were not conditions, but they wanted to hear that we would address the issue of the financial measures in the context of the talks," Hill told reporters afterward. "And I said we would be prepared to create a mechanism, or working group and to address these financial issues."

President Bush that same day put the emphasis on the second track -- lining up a coalition of the willing to enforce U.N. sanctions by imposing a blockade on the North starting with nuclear, biological, chemical arms, and missiles, or what it calls the Proliferation Security Initiative: "We'll be sending teams to the region to work with our partners to make sure that the current United Nations Security Council resolution is enforced but also to make sure the talks are effective."

PSI has had no success in impeding weapons shipments so far, though one freighter carrying missiles for Yemen was boarded by Spain at U.S. instigation in 2002. When the Yemenis correctly claimed it was a lawful transfer, however, the ship and its cargo were released.

Has there ever been a successful U.S. interdiction of missile shipments? Yes, in the Cuban missile crisis of 1963. That showed how risky a blockade can be.

It also showed that coercion alone did not succeed. It took diplomatic give-and-take to get the Soviet missiles withdrawn.

Similarly, sanctions alone are unlikely to bring about policy change or regime change in Pyongyang. Pyongyang is not about to collapse. Nor will it stop arming without quid pro quos from Washington.

Instead, given Pyongyang's penchant for playing tit-for-tat, retaliation is more likely. The North can shut down its Yongbyon reactor, unload the spent fuel and reprocess it to extract another bomb's worth of plutonium or more. In reaction to the comprehensive sanctions imposed by Japan, it could also test more missiles, possibly its new IRBM. A nuclear test is less likely for now because the North has to fix what went wrong with the first test.

If sanctions won't yield much benefit, they do carry serious risks. The risks are not so much in the sanctions themselves, but in the blockade to enforce them, as the Cuban missile crisis demonstrated.

Since even a blockade on military equipment and petroleum without U.N. authorization is an act of war, the United States called it a quarantine. Now the administration interprets U.N. resolution 1718 as authorizing interdiction of ships on the high seas. Extending the blockade of North Korea to luxury goods, as the administration wants to do, will only complicate that.

Concerned that the blockade pressure the Soviet Union to reconsider its missile deployments to Cuba without triggering a firefight or war, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara wanted to make sure how the Navy intended to stop and board Soviet ships. He went to the Navy flag plot, the inner sanctum in the Pentagon where only admirals are allowed, to confront CNO, Admiral George Anderson, on the rules of engagement. In response Anderson waved the navy manual in McNamara's face and said, "It's all in there." McNamara shot back, "I don't give a damn what John Paul Jones would have done. I want to know what you are going to do now." Anderson told the Secretary to go back where he belonged and let the Navy run the blockade.

McNamara stormed back to his office and called President Kennedy. They decided to establish, for the first time in U.S. history, a direct line of communication from the White House Situation Room to the command ship in the blockade. That took time, and meanwhile a Soviet missile-carrying freighter was allowed to pass through the blockade to Cuba. Even worse, as McNamara learned only after the crisis, U.S. submarines around the globe were forcing Soviet submarines to surface.

Nor did McNamara find out until many years later what U.S. intelligence failed to ascertain -- that Soviet nuclear weapons were already in Cuba.

Given this unhappy history, it is essential that the United States share intelligence with Congress and its allies before interdicting any vessel, including what it is suspected of carrying and how it is armed, and set clear rules of engagement in advance. Under what circumstances can boarding parties use their weapons? Can ships or submarines fire across the bow of a North Korean vessel? Disable its rudder? Sink it? Attack Korean submarines patrolling in the vicinity?

The Cuban blockade was designed to pressure the Soviets to reverse course and stop shipping missiles to Cuba. To deal with the missiles already there President Kennedy threatened escalation, but he knew coercion alone would not work without giving Khrushchev a face-saving way out. So he had his brother Robert make a secret deal with the Soviets, pledging not to invade Cuba and telling them that U.S. missiles based in Turkey would be removed.

Will President Bush give Kim Jong-il -- and himself -- a similar face-saving way out? He could start by urging banks that have frozen North Korea's hard currency accounts to release the proceeds of its legitimate trade and then engage in sustained diplomatic give-and take for a change.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@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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