Response to “Clinton’s Mission to Pyongyang”

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Policy Forum Online 09-064A: August 6th, 2009

CONTENTS

I. Introduction

II. Comments by T.J. Pempel

III. Nautilus invites your responses

Go to "Clinton's Mission to Pyongyang" (August 6th, 2009)

Go to Policy Forum Online index

I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay, " Clinton's Mission to Pyongyang " by John Delury, Associate Director of the Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations and director of the North Korea Inside Out Task Force, which appeared as Policy Forum Online 09-064A: August 6th, 2009.

This response includes comments by T.J. Pempel, Professor of Political Science at the University of California.

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. Comments by T.J. Pempel

Nautilus just published a good piece by John Delury on the Clinton trip to the DPRK. I share some of his optimism about the possibility that this might be a genuine opportunity to get back to improved relations but I am a bit more cautious.

Among his conclusions was that the many photographers at the airport indicated that their wide distribution in the DPRK would be a way of telegraphing to the DPRK people (and elite, including so-called hard liners) that the regime was interested in good relations with the US. I think an alternative interpretation is at least as plausible. The many photos also show the 'success' of the hard line toward the US and legitimate the current regime's nuclear policy and its confrontation with the US. Legitimacy for the regime used to be based on its alleged economic successes; that no longer has much credibility as information about the successes in the South and in China filter in to the North. So the new legitimating ideology is that the North remains pure to Korean culture and distinctiveness while the South has sold out. And while the US used to be most worried about the USSR, that concern is now gone. And so the current global scene involves a struggle between 'pure' North Korea and the 'hostile and corrupt' USA.

The Clinton visit plays to this DPRK narrative. It shows how a hard line in the DPRK yields fruits as the US sends one of its highest leaders to the DPRK to 'apologize' etc. etc. etc.

Delury may be right--the trip, the pardon, the dinner and the photos may all be a first step toward showing an effort to reach out to the US. But equally it may be telegraphing the value of a hard line, of continued confrontation, and of the need for the North to retain its nuclear capabilities as a way to keep the US at bay.

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

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