

Response to “How Light Water Reactors Figure into Negotiations with North Korea”

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Policy Forum Online 09-063A: August 4th, 2009

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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay, "[How Light Water Reactors Figure into Negotiations with North Korea](#)" by Jeff Goldstein, a State Department desk officer for North Korea from 1994 to 1996, which appeared as Policy Forum Online 09-063A: August 4th, 2009.

This response includes comments by Marion Spina, a Washington DC attorney.

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 Marion Spina

I greatly appreciate Jeff Goldstein's article explaining the role of light water reactors (LWRs) in future negotiations with North Korea. He provided excellent perspective and tidily identified practical problems associated with the idea and the possibility of salvaging some parts of the earlier efforts.

Jeff's concept can be expanded to include cooperation from each of the other members of the Six Party Talks. Building on the basic concept that DPRK would receive the previously promised LWRs, perhaps roles could be added so that all members are involved. The US, while agreeing to deal directly with the DPRK, could involve the other members of the six-party talks in the ultimate solution so that a balance can be maintained on the question of "bilateral" versus "six-party".

For example, assuming that some accommodation to Japan could be deemed to satisfy Japan's concerns over its abducted citizens, Japan could directly provide LWRs as its colonial reparations. That is, rather than taking reparations off the table as some in Japan have suggested, Japan could pay the reparations in the form of the two LWRs. I'm guessing that the total price of the reactors might be about the amount that Japan would otherwise have provided in development aid. However the LWRs would be provided on a modified "Build Operate Transfer" (BOT) model, as further discussed below.

The Republic of Korea could enter into a contract to purchase electricity produced by the new plants and delivered by high-power transmission lines to the ROK electrical grid. The ROK would pay for and control those transmission lines.

Meanwhile, Russia, seems to have left open its offer to resume construction of a nuclear power plant in the DPRK. This offer could be accepted and Russia could build an additional nuclear power generating facility in the northern part of the DPRK (Yongbyon?), hopefully using light-water or other proliferation-resistant technology, and again using the BOT model.

China could purchase electricity from the Russian plant by an arrangement similar to that described for the ROK's purchase of power from the Japan-supplied LWRs.

Under the BOT model, a portion of profits from operating these "donated" nuclear power plants could go to the respective Japanese and Russian plant operators until the DPRK takes over the plants. But, operation, and therefore, security, of the Japanese and Russian built plants and access to nuclear fuel would be controlled by the Japanese and Russian suppliers until such time as the DPRK has disclosed and disposed of its nuclear materials and has re-joined and thoroughly complied with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. This arrangement would provide a constant incentive to the DPRK to quickly become NPT-compliant.

The US would play a key role in persuading the other parties to agree to the plan and in following through with normalization actions without expecting to get "paid" by the DPRK for doing so. That is, the US should proceed with normalization of relations in advance of DPRK's abandoning its nuclear materials. This would be a no-cost investment in the project that would at least result in the US establishing a diplomatic presence in Pyongyang, and allowing the growth of understanding and cooperation. Actual US aid to DPRK could be limited to any the DPRK "earns" by application to the US Millennium Challenge Corporation which ties aid to a country's demonstration of a commitment to just and democratic governance, economic freedom, and investments in its citizenry.

Hopefully, any concern on the part of the ROK that its role is not as central as it was in the "KEDO I" project, would be allayed by its recognition that its role is parallel to that of China, i.e. a purchaser of power. Both China and the ROK would be able to continue to use their payments for such power as leverage in their ongoing relationships with DPRK. The DPRK would have a valid "export" to offset the huge volumes it would import from its two neighbors.

The above steps would take years to execute.

So, while it appears that the DPRK is receiving something in advance, in reality, the DPRK receives nothing but the prestige it ardently seeks, because the plants and their profits would be controlled by other parties until the DPRK fulfills whatever commitments it has made with respect to its nuclear programs. By the time the plants are generating and selling electricity for profit, the cost-benefit analysis by the DPRK with respect to the need to hang on to its nuclear option will be much easier.

More importantly, once a positive program is in place, the activities and communication required to implement these plans would have a huge impact on the DPRK's methods and abilities for coping with international commerce. While the nuclear power plants appear to be the carrots, they would really be tent-poles, holding up the tent so that other activities could develop, gradually transforming the DPRK. This would ultimately lead to "regime change" in a positive, gradual way.

As a process, using LWRs as tent-poles seems much more attractive than the process of crisis management. As a realistic way of achieving US objectives, this seems much more workable than the constant return to the idea that regime change comes from regime collapse that comes from isolation and sanctions. In the past, the US has found ways to set aside its distaste for dictators in order to pursue US national interests. This is possible with the DPRK. The question is whether US national interests lie in peacefully and gradually transforming the DPRK or in maintaining the status quo.

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.

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