Response to “Obama and North Korea: The Road Ahead”

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Policy Forum Online 08-092A: December 3rd, 2008
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CONTENTS

I. Introduction

II. Comments by Kim Myong Chol

III. Nautilus invites your responses

Go to "Obama and North Korea: The Road Ahead" (December 3rd, 2008)

Go to Policy Forum Online index

I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay, " Obama and North Korea: The Road Ahead " by Peter M. Beck, Professor at American University in Washington, D.C. and Yonsei University in Seoul, which appeared as Policy Forum Online 08-092A: December 3rd, 2008.

This response includes comments by Kim Myong Chol, Executive Director, Center for Korean-American Peace.

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 Kim Myong Chol

Mr. Barack Obama has rode a massive wave of voter discontent with the disastrous policy behavior of George Bush's two terms to become the next President of the US, promising change to its conduct of domestic and foreign policy.

Now all eyes are focused on what change the US President-elect will bring on to Washington's relations with Pyongyang as he indicated during the campaign his willingness to meet with Kim Jong Il without preconditions by calling the notion of not talking to North Korea "ridiculous."

The New York Times notes July 6, 2006: "Dealing with North Korea has frustrated every president since Truman. But it has proved particularly vexing for Mr. Bush because his administration has engaged in a six-year internal argument about whether to negotiate with the country or try to plot its collapse - it has sought to do both, simultaneously - and because America's partners in dealing with North Korea each have differing interests in North Korea's future."

However, Peter Beck's five-point recommendations are too tactical and technical to deal with the North Korea-US nuclear standoff as a strategic policy issue. They fail to identify its causes and offer a fundamental recipe for its resolution. Their adoption would most likely leave Obama little different from a second-term Bush or worse in regards to North Korea policy conduct.

A likely net outcome will be many more years of seemingly endless series of marathon talks -- too maddening, frustrating and sometimes humiliating for American negotiators as experienced by Robert Galluci and Christopher Hill. The American negotiators will find themselves disappointed again and again, playing into the hands of canny poker Kim Jong Il as Richard Armitage expressed a grudging admiration for him.

The recommendations are fraught with two fatal flaws: The first is his suggestion that the Obama Administration should let its North Korea policy conduct be hostage of South Korea as if Seoul were a protectorate of the US. The statement betrays a hard fact of life that with all its economic affluence and huge military budget, South Korea is yet to wean itself off dependence on the US and take care of its own relations with North Korea.

This premise would doom US Korea policy behavior from the beginning, bringing it no closer to its goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula. Bush ignored strong Japanese opposition and protest before removing North Korea from the list of states that allegedly sponsor terrorism. Obama would certainly look outshined by Bush.

The second is inattention to two essential facts.

The first is the fact that the American policy of hostility has relentlessly driven the Kim Jong Il Administration to do what it can as a sovereign and independent state to acquire nuclear weapons and their long-range means of delivery as the Washington Post editorially notes April 29, 2003. The Toronto Star said in its January 14, 2003 commentary, "Who Can Blame North Korea?": "That's what North Korea, far more noisily, is also doing It is arming itself to stave off what Bush has all but promised. Any sensible country would do the same."

The second is what former US President Jimmy Carter calls special attention to in the Sept. 2, 2203 USA Today, that is, "the cultural and almost sacred commitment" of Kim Jong Il and his people to stick to their guns in defense of their national sovereignty and dignity as a highly proud nation, whatever consequences it may entail.

"Notwithstanding their abysmal economic failures and the resulting hardships of their people, North Korean leaders have never deviated from a commitment to military strength. They maintain a formidable army, with artillery and missiles able to wreak great destruction on Seoul and the northern portion of South Korea, regardless of how much punishment North Koreans might have to absorb during a U.S. attack or counterattack. The development of advanced rocketry and now a potential nuclear capability is further proof of their scientific resources."

No wonder, Time writes May 1, 2008: "But bribing Kim is the only realistic strategy. When the next U.S. Administration takes over in January, it's going to come to the same conclusion whether the President is named McCain, Obama or Clinton."

The Time magazine statement is misleading, however. The message of Kim Jong Il is not to get aid or attention but is that the Americans have only to end their hostility to his Administration and deal with North Korea as it is, not as they may wish it to be, and peacefully coexist with the North Koreans.

Obama should have empathy to know about what it is like to be a supreme leader of a sworn US enemy in a perpetual state of war with the world's sole superpower for more than half a century. Just imagine what it is like to live like North Koreans, with their country divided into two, exposed to the threat of nuclear annihilation for more than half a century.

This derived insight would lead Obama to see the fallacy of the preconceived notion that the DPRK is a rogue state whose leader is irrational while the US is a rational and responsible member of the world. Most importantly he would learn that the US policy of animosity has bred a nuclear-armed North Korea and that a nuclear-armed North Korea would represent no threat to the US unless that Washington remains antagonistic. The president-elect would see a respectable leader in Kim Jong Il who has had the US "yielding to North Korea too often" as Ambassador Winston Lord writes in the Washington Post on April 26, 2008.

This said, it is no wonder that Obama might as well opt for a smart and most logical course of action the Christian Science Monitor suggests November 7, 2008. In an op-ed former Bush Administration official Bennett Ramberg states: "Kim Jong Il beat President Bush at the nuclear game: He built, tested, and kept the bomb."

"Obama must pursue a new, bolder diplomatic approach in order to warm ties and cool nuclear ambitions. His administration should start with a simple step: an unconditional offer to exchange ambassadors."

"In 2007, Washington and Pyongyang committed themselves to improving their relations and moving toward a full diplomatic relationship. The United States should seek to fulfill that goal next year and couple it with the formal end of the Korean War, a matter still unresolved."

In fact, his proposal is tantamount to emulating the British, German, Canadian, Italian and Australian examples. They are members of the G-8 and major allies of the US. Among others the United Kingdom is a nuclear weapons state and a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

They established diplomatic relations with North Korea, a member of the United Nations without any preconditions in full knowledge that the US has refused to put a formal end to the Korean War and recognize the Far Eastern country since long before the North Koreans launched on the nuclear weapons program. In their eyes the US attitude is nothing but quibbling.

When negotiating the exchange of ambassadors with North Korea, none of them discussed the

nuclear weapons programs and the missile program with the Kim Jong Il Administration because North Korea has a legitimate sovereign right to defend itself with whatever weapons deemed necessary. Nor was the human rights situation on the agenda. With all its initial balking, the US had no difficulty recognizing both India and Pakistan as nuclear weapons states.

In 1994, 2000, 2005, and 2007, the US and the DPRK committed themselves not to interfere in the internal affairs, respect their respective sovereignty and move toward a full diplomatic relationship, while putting a long-overdue formal ending to the Korean War, which has never ended.

The Obama Administration can catch up by proposing to hold a summit with the Kim Jong Il Administration or send a presidential envoy to Pyongyang to negotiate immediate establishment of diplomatic relations between Pyongyang and Washington and formally terminate the Korean War.

The fallout of this policy behavior is obvious and far-reaching. It will put to rest the Korean War, defuse the most dangerous potential flashpoint in Korea, set free the US military presence from any charges of breach of international agreement and turn it into a peaceful benign role, a purely bilateral issue between Seoul and Washington. Indisputably it will go a long way to creating a climate conducive to inter-Korean reconciliation and reunification and fostering sufficient mutual trust between the DPRK and the US which will encourage the Kim Jong Il Administration to forgo its nuclear arsenal pursuant to the will of the late Kim Il Sung on the eventual denuclearization.

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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Return to top
back to top

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