

Response to “Obama’s Options on North Korea”

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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay, "[Obama's Options on North Korea](#)" by Tong Kim, a visiting professor at the Graduate University of North Korean Studies, and an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), which appeared as Policy Forum Online 09-004A: January 15th, 2009.

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

Obviously the article by Tong Kim "Obama's Options on North Korea" is uncharacteristic of a scholar with a good knowledge of 5,000 years of Korean history and the history of DPRK-US negotiations.

The article is fraught with five major misunderstandings.

In the first place, the article totally fails to address a very simple but least noted and hard fact, that is, the US policy of hostility to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the DPRK): the root cause that has relentlessly driven the Kim Jong Il Administration to arm itself with nuclear weapons and their long-range means of delivery.

The US refusal to have full ties with North Korea is one thing, with which the Kim Jong Il Administration can easily dispense, and the US bid to isolate it and threat to nuke it is quite another, which is perceived with alarm as a fundamental threat to the national security of North Korea.

The tiny DPRK is unique in that it has found itself living under the US nuclear sword of Damocles for more than half a century, while exposed to the endless US efforts to isolate and criminalize it.

Dr. Gavan McCormack of Australian National University offers the following observation on the US policy of animosity and nuclear intimidation to the DPRK that is the primary factor that has led the DPRK to gatecrash the elite club of nuclear weapons states:

"The extremely abnormal circumstances under which it has existed since the founding of the state in 1948, facing the concentrated efforts of the global superpower to isolate, impoverish, and overthrow it, have not been of its choosing. Frozen out of major global institutions and subject to financial and economic sanctions, denounced in fundamentalist terms as "evil" (and beyond redemption), North Korea could scarcely be anything but suspicious and fearful."

"In particular, North Korea has faced the threat of nuclear annihilation for more than half a century. If anything is calculated to drive a people mad, and to generate in it an obsession with unity and survival, and with nuclear weapons as the sine qua non of national security, it must be such an experience. Its demand for relief from nuclear intimidation was unquestionably just and yet was ignored by the global community, till, eventually, as we know, it took the matter into its own hands."

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."

In a January 10, 2003 BBC commentary by Daniel Plesch, a scholar at the Royal United Services Institute for Defense Studies, said, "North Korea has decided to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, invoking its legal right to do so. "The move increases international tension and the risk of Japan reconsidering its position on nuclear weapons. But it is in line with the new

approach to global security adopted by the Bush administration."

The US has a nuclear-strike force deployed in South Korea, Japan and in the Pacific. The American nuclear-armed units are ready to mount a surprise assault on the DPRK, involving warplanes, missiles, and navy assets. The American forces are engaged in numerous large-scale joint nuclear-attack war games in the vicinity of the DPRK with the Japanese and South Korean forces.

True, the Americans deny the presence of nuclear weapons in South Korea and Japan, but they fail to produce a compelling verified proof to support their statement. As a matter of fact, the American, South Koreans and Japanese publicly claim that South Korea and Japan are under the US nuclear umbrella.

Unless the US ends regarding the DPRK as its enemy and addresses its paramount national security concern not in words but in complete, verifiable and irreversible manner, never will the Kim Jong Il Administration consider reducing and renouncing its hard-won nuclear weapons.

The Kim Jong Il Administration has good reason to extend deepest thanks for the departing President George Bush for his critical role in catapulting the DPRK to the status of a nuclear weapons state.

Secondly, the article is wrong to describe the goal of the six-party talks as "the North's complete and verifiable nuclear disarmament." This represents a bid to distort the objective of the multilateral nuclear talks from verified complete denuclearization of the whole of the Korean Peninsula into a unilateral nuclear disarmament of North Korea.

What belies the statement is an unwarranted stereotype view that the DPRK's acquisition of nukes is irrational and dangerous, while US possession of US nukes are rational, intended to preserve peace. Nothing is farther removed from truth as the March 12, 2002 New York Times editorially branded America as "a nuclear rogue," which may well prompt non-nuclear countries to seek nuclear weapons "to avoid nuclear attack."

The US is the first to develop the nuclear weapons, the first to use nukes by atomic-bombing two cities in virtually defeated Japan, partly to obtain actual data on the extent of damage a nuclear bomb can inflict and partly to awe the then major rival Soviet Union. The US is the only country to transfer nuclear arms to the United Kingdom, which has US-designed nuclear warheads, missiles and nuclear-submarines. The US has a stated doctrine of nuclear preemption.

What is urgently needed for a nuclear-weapon-free world is for the US to renounce its doctrine of nuclear first use, reduce its nuclear force and withdrawing all nuclear weapons from its ex-territorial bases overseas.

In a joint contribution to the January 9, 2009 International Herald Tribune, four senior German political leaders Helmut Schmidt, Richard von Weizsäcker, Egon Bahr and Hans-Dietrich Genscher called upon Russia and the US to lead global nuclear disarmament by reducing their nuclear weapons and asking the US to withdraw all nuclear warheads from Germany.

Thirdly, the Tong Kim article seems to be either unaware of the pledged readiness of Obama to unconditionally meet with Kim Jong Il when it states: "Sherman can tell the North Korean leadership that a meeting with President Obama is possible when the United States and its allies are convinced that the North truly intends to abandon its nuclear weapons even before complete denuclearization. To prove its intentions, the North must take positive but irreversible steps."

If not, the article cannot but be construed as a demand that the President-elect retract his pledge

and instead attach conditions to holding a possible summit with the North Korean leader. In the January 17, 2009 issue of Japan's vernacular daily Yomiuri Shimbun Dr Zbigniew Brzezinski of Johns Hopkins's University School of International Studies stressed the importance of holding unconditional talks with North Korea.

Its commitment to the time-honored Korean values of national independence and pride will not allow the Kim Jong Il Administration to condescend to "take positive but irreversible steps" to seek a summit with the Obama Administration.

The fourth is failure to realize that the Kim Jong Il Administration no longer thinks normalization of relations with the US as of critical importance because the DPRK has emerged a full-fledged nuclear weapons state. It has all types of nuclear weapons, including neutron and hydrogen warheads and hundreds of ICBMs that can strike any remotest target in the USA.

The DPRK has prospered, surviving dozens of years in the absence of diplomatic relations with the US, which has wound up "Yielding to North Korea Too Often" as the Washington Post splashed an eye-popping headline on April 26, 2008.

Four of the six nuclear weapons states have full diplomatic relations with the DPRK; Russia, China, the United Kingdom, India and Pakistan. The first three are permanent members of the UN Security Council. The United Kingdom is a key ally and the elder brother of the US. The DPRK has a lower-level diplomatic mission in Paris.

All the European allies such as Germany, Italy, Australia, and Canada never demanded the DPRK renounce its nuclear weapons before having full relations with Pyongyang. Those US allies are well aware that the DPRK has a sovereign right to acquire whatever weapons deemed necessary to deal with the perceived national security threat.

The European states have expanded prosperous economic relations with the DPRK as all hotels in Pyongyang and local cities are filled to capacity with European business people.

The last and fifth is the absence of the most vitally required recommendation that the Obama Administration make a strategic decision to adopt a policy of "live and let live" toward the DPRK.

All the major Western allies of the US have full relations with the DPRK, and the US recognizes India and Pakistan as with all its sanctions. Canada to the north and Mexico to the south have full relations with North Korea.

The Obama Administration has no legitimate reason not to seek peaceful co-existence with the nuclear-armed DPRK. Nuclear weapons in the DPRK's arsenal cannot provide any justification for the American policy of hostility to Pyongyang because it is their mother. The American demand that the DPRK relinquish its nuclear weapons capability first before full normalization is tantamount to putting the cart before the horse.

There is no precedence where a nuclear weapons state has ever renounced its nuclear weapons. Among the nuclear weapons states, the US must show moral strength to establish the world's first precedent that even a superpower can go without nuclear capability.

However, what distinguishes North Korea from other nuclear-weapons states is the vowed readiness of its supreme leader Kim Jong Il to fulfill the commitment of the late father image Kim Il Sung to the denuclearization of the whole of the ancestral Land of Morning Calm.

The Kim Jong Il Administration remains committed to the renunciation of nuclear weapons once it

has perceives the DPRK is no longer an enemy of the US and is freed from a nuclear threat.

Normalization of state relations between Pyongyang and Washington could be one of the important steps the Obama Administration can adopt toward creation of an environment in which the Kim Jong Il Administration will find nuclear weapons a white elephant. Holding an unconditional DPRK-US summit, concluding a DPRK peace treaty and resuming the construction of light-water reactors could be among the next major conducive steps.

III. Response to the comments by Kim Myong Chol by Tong Kim

I welcome and appreciate a lengthy response by Mr. Kim Myong Chol, who is well known as "an unofficial DPRK spokesman" for accurately representing the views of the DPRK. While faulting my article "Obama's Options on North Korea," Mr. Kim's response supports Pyongyang's new hardened position on the issue of North Korea's nuclear weapons - as announced by the DPRK's foreign ministry spokesman through KCNA on January 13 and 17, and the substance of a message that Pyongyang sent to Washington by Selig Harrison, a veteran American North Korea specialist, just before the inauguration of President Barack Obama.

(In my new article, "Obama Seeks Peaceful Resolution to North Korean Issue," which will appear in the February issue of Vantage Point, a monthly English publication on North Korean affairs, published by Yonhop News in Seoul, I discuss the latest development of policy statements both from Pyongyang and Washington and reiterate some suggestions for the new Obama administration and the DPRK leadership. A part of this article was already published by The Korea Times last Saturday, January 24.)

Pyongyang's new position is summarized as follows:

- The normalization of relations between the DPRK and the United States should be realized first as a necessary, but not sufficient condition, for denuclearization.
- Nuclear verification should also be applied to South Korea as well.
- North Korea "has weaponized all of its plutonium" that was listed in its declaration in compliance with the phase II of the February 13 agreement.
- North Korea's nuclear weapons shall be excluded from inspection.
- The DPRK will remain as a recognized nuclear weapons state, with the possibility of renouncing its nuclear weapons only when it determines "there is no U.S. nuclear threat."
- The United States should deal with the DPRK as a nuclear power.

Now I will respond to the "five major misunderstandings," which Mr. Kim argued my article on the Nautilus on-line policy forum "was fraught with." I will discuss them one by one:

(1) On my article's failure to address U.S. hostile policy and threat to the DPRK's security as "the root cause" for the DPRK's development of nuclear weapons:

The DPRK's assertion of the "root cause" is not new. This claim has been consistent throughout U.S.-DPRK negotiations - even when they were making good progress -- since the first nuclear crisis of 1994. As Kim Myong Chol listed the views of some analysts and press commentaries, there has been a sympathetic view of North Korea's pursuit for nuclear weapons. Given a long history of hostile confrontation between the DPRK and the United States, the DPRK may not be blamed for believing that it was facing a threatening, hostile United States especially during the first six years of the Bush

administration. Bush pronounced a strategic doctrine of preemptive strikes as part of war against terrorism after September 11. The United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq and crushed the Taliban and Saddam Hussein's regime. President Bush designated North Korea as "a member of the Axis of Evil," refusing to engage it seriously. He sent Pyongyang mixed signals between engagement and regime change. But those years have passed.

On the other hand, there has been a more widely held view in Washington that the DPRK's nuclear development is an immediate threat to the stability of East Asia and a direct challenge to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. It has caused serious concerns about the possibility of further proliferation. The DPRK is viewed by many as a country that has a record of brutal acts of terror, military violence and provocation. Washington as a whole does not believe that the DPRK needs nuclear weapons for a deterrent, as it has sufficient conventional forces with formidable fire power.

Even if the defensive nature of its nuclear weapons is accepted as genuine - that is to deter "a preemptive U.S. nuclear strike," Pyongyang must understand that the repercussion from a nuclear armed North Korea will be far reaching. It could trigger a nuclear arms race with its neighbors - Japan, South Korea, and even Taiwan. Would the DPRK be more secure being surrounded by its nuclear armed neighbors backed by the United States, still the strongest nuclear super power?

Absent mutual trust between Pyongyang and Washington, and in light of an imbalance of strategic capability unilaterally in favor of the United States, the sheer military might of combined U.S. -ROK forces and the impact of their exercises might appear threatening to the security of the DPRK, although Pyongyang has been told repeatedly that the exercises are defensive. The United States has renounced any intent to attack or invade North Korea through several fora, including the six party talks. What one side intends to be defensive might be seen as offensive to the other side. This perception applies to both sides.

The doctrine of U.S. nuclear umbrellas for South Korea and Japan is valid only in the event of a nuclear attack from an external nuclear force. A denuclearized North Korea could become a candidate for receiving the benefit of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The nuclear umbrella also helps restrain the recipient nations from being provoked into developing their own nuclear weapons.

Enmity between the DPRK and the United States is mutual: it should end as the two countries move forward toward improved relations. Former President Bill Clinton made clear to Chairman Kim Jong Il that the United States saw "no reason for the two countries to remain permanently hostile." Chairman Kim Jong Il has stated that he does not see the United States as a sworn enemy of 100 years." The US-DPRK joint communiqué of 2000 stated that "neither government would have hostile intent toward the other." It further "reaffirmed that their relations should be based on the principles of respect for each other's sovereignty and non-interference in each other's internal affairs." And the Bush administration agreed in the September 19 joint statement that "The DPRK and the United States undertook to respect each other's sovereignty, exist peacefully together and take steps to normalize their relations."

Recently the Bush administration delisted the DPRK as a state terrorism sponsor partly in response to Pyongyang's demand for showing a sign of the removal of U.S. hostility toward the Kim Jong Il government. The resolution of the Banco Delta Asia issue also reflected a response to the DPRK's similar desire to see non-hostile intent on the part of the Bush administration. Of course these measures were carried out as mutually agreed conditions for moving forward in the multilateral talks toward the goal of achieving the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

The DPRK's obsession with "U.S. hostility" as the "root cause" or as a negotiating strategy raises the

question of what other specific conditions will have to be met to convince the North that the United States does not harbor hostile intent. Now Pyongyang says normalization will not be enough. For the same token at what point in the progress of engagement, would North Korea determine that it does not feel threatened by the United States? The decision will depend on the DPRK's subjective judgment, if the proposition of its new position was to be taken seriously. A list of elements for consideration to make such a decision will be endless, beyond normalization and a peace treaty.

(2) On the demand for nuclear verification of the South:

Pyongyang's logic regarding this demand is both political and linguistic. The September 19 Joint Statement defines the goal of the six party talks as "the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," which geographically includes South Korea and which Pyongyang believes supports its political demand for equal footing and promotes its security interest in the verification of non-existence of nuclear weapons.

"The denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" has been a consistent term of Pyongyang's choice since the days of President Kim Il Song. The Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula between the North and the South was signed in 1992, after President George H.W. Bush announced the withdrawal of all U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from overseas and after then president of South Korea Roh Tae Woo confirmed that there was "not a single nuclear weapon in the South." At that time it was South Korea that pursued mutual inspections, but North Korea rejected the proposal because the North would not be ready for opening the Yongpyon nuclear facilities and its military units for inspection. Would the DPRK be ready for mutual inspection this time, ready to open its KPA units to inspection?

The September 19 Joint Statement also provides reassurances of the non-existence of nuclear weapons in South Korea by the United States and the Republic of Korea. It also declares the DPRK's commitment to abandon its nuclear weapons. Despite the DPRK's alleged suspicion of the presence of nuclear weapons in the South, the DPRK knew from the beginning that the whole purpose of multilateral negotiations was to ensure a nuclear free North Korea.

Also, when Mr. Kim Myong Chol said that "the Kim Jong Il administration" has reason to thank President Bush for "his critical role in catapulting the DPRK to the status of a nuclear weapons state", he seemed to be basing his argument on the references to the DPRK as a nuclear state in some U.S. government papers and on some comments by American officials, including Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. These references simply were descriptive of the state of the DPRK's newly acquired nuclear capability that should be taken seriously from the security point of view. They were not an official U.S. acceptance of the DPRK as a nuclear weapons state. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton during her Senate confirmation hearing reaffirmed that the continuing U.S. objective is to achieve "the complete and verifiable elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons."

Kim Myong Chol writes about the "urgent need for a nuclear free world," calling for the U.S. to drop "its doctrine of first nuclear use, and to reduce its nuclear force."

In this connection, I can cite the Obama administration's new foreign policy agenda that will set and pursue "a goal of a world without nuclear weapons." Obama will "maintain a strong deterrent as long as nuclear weapons exist." President Obama and Vice President Biden will take steps to eliminate nuclear weapons and will "stop development of new nuclear weapons." Robert Gates, who is staying as Secretary of Defense in the new administration, recently told the audience of a Washington think tank that "within a few years, we will have 75 percent fewer nuclear weapons than at the end of the Cold War."

(3) On "the pledged readiness of Obama to unconditionally meet with Kim Jong Il:"

Although Obama's campaign statement on this subject was attacked by his Republican opponent, Senator John McCain, the Obama administration still supports "tough direct diplomacy without preconditions with all nations" that obviously included North Korea and Iran. I quote from the new White House website: Obama also want to "do the careful preparation necessary", to "signal that America is ready to come to the table and is willing to lead....and to deal with challenges like Iran and North Korea's nuclear programs." Anybody would know that "the careful preparation necessary" means something more substantive than mere logistic preparations. Secretary Clinton also stated that she would be "willing to meet any foreign leader at a time and a place of my choosing." But Obama also pledges to "to crack down on nuclear proliferation...so that counties like North Korea and Iran will automatically face strong international sanctions."

A summit may take place to show each side's good faith in engagement, to build trust on the leadership level and to help negotiations move forward from a point of stalemate. Or it may take place to confirm and celebrate successful progress that shall have been made and to complete it in a manner satisfactory to both sides. Whichever the case might be, a DPRK-U.S. summit will require careful preparations in terms of policy and strategy. A summit can take place as a ceremony to sign a document proclaiming official diplomatic normalization between the two countries or to bless the singing of a peace treaty, or to celebrate the final disposition of North Korea's nuclear weapons.

I suggested that Chairman Kim Jong Il declare his intent to abandon the DPRK's nuclear weapons and make sure that the DPRK take some positive steps. But these suggested steps are not preconditions for an Obama-Kim Jong Il meeting. If the DPRK take the initiative with some positive steps, without reversing the course as it often did in the past and if it does not raise the obstacle bar to negotiation - which was reflected in its recently hardened stance, it would be more hopeful for the holding of a historic U.S.-DPRK summit sooner. The DPRK should understand that unless President Obama is convinced that such a summit would lead to a successful conclusion to the controversy over North Korea's nuclear programs resulting in their total dismantlement, Obama's political risk might be too high to take at a time when he embarks on a path of bipartisan foreign policy.

For example, Pyongyang could announce a moratorium on further nuclear tests and on missile firings, as long as it is engaged in negotiation with Washington. Or refrain from making bellicose statements against the South. The DPRK could arrange an interview of Chairman Kim Jong Il with a major American media outlet to declare his intent to give up the nukes and to become a friendly country to the United States. The United States respects the DPRK's sovereignty and is willing to work with the DPRK for the peaceful and prosperous future of the Korean Peninsula.

(4) On Mr. Kim's representation of Pyongyang's position that the DPRK, "as a full fledged nuclear weapons state, no longer thinks normalization of relations with the U.S. as of critical importance:"

I am afraid if Pyongyang is determined to keep nuclear weapons regardless of change in relations, Washington will find little interest in engaging the DPRK in negotiation. This path, if taken by the North, may force the United States to opt for the plan B of the 1999 Perry Report -- that is to increase the conventional and nuclear deterrent in cooperation with its South Korean allies against the North and to prepare for a potential DPRK attack. Neither side would benefit from this scenario. The old sanctions would be re-imposed and new sanctions - military and economic - could be adopted to further isolate and contain the nuclear North Korea. Intensified surveillance and maritime blockades as well as the reinforcement of Bush's PSI (Proliferation Security Initiative) may be considered for employment in a concerted international effort to prevent the proliferation of North Korean missiles and nuclear weapons.

Mr. Kim's reiteration of North Korea's claim of possessing "all types of nuclear weapons, including neutron and hydrogen warheads and hundreds of ICBMs that can strike any remote target in the U.S.A," is unnecessarily threatening and provocative. But this does not intimidate the United States. I do not compare the DPRK's hardened position to "a child crying for mom's attention," as quipped by the former spokesman of the Bush administration. But the DPRK's increasing demands at this juncture are not helpful to pragmatically address the long term strategic interest of North Korea.

As a personal footnote, I remember what DPRK first vice foreign minister Kang Sok Ju said in his fateful meeting with James Kelly, then President Bush's special envoy to Pyongyang, in October 2002. When Kang said that the DPRK was bound to make more powerful weapons than nuclear weapons...and that all kinds of weapons will be coming out," my immediate reaction was whether he meant that North Korea was going to produce hydrogen bombs. In hindsight, if Mr. Kim is right, North Korea must have gone ahead to manufacture "all kinds of weapons," including neutron and hydrogen bombs. I am familiar with the DPRK rhetoric that its people are ready to die to protect their leader and their chosen system. But why should they risk their lives when there are peaceful ways to improve their security and economic well-being while protecting their sovereignty and national dignity?

(5) On the absence of a recommendation that "the Obama administration make a strategic decision to adopt a policy of 'live and let live' toward the DPRK":

The Bush administration even agreed to the premise of peaceful coexistence with North Korea in September 2005. For obvious reasons, the Obama administration is not expected to drop the idea of "peaceful coexistence" or to pursue a policy of regime change in Pyongyang. If anything, the Obama administration will be more serious than its predecessor to work with the Kim Jong Il government to peacefully and diplomatically resolve the North Korean nuclear issue for the mutual benefits of the DPRK and the international community.

The issue of sequencing the order for normalization and denuclearization can be resolved by the principle of "action for action," which was adopted at the initiative of the DPRK in the six party talks. The announcement of closing the two issues -- normalization and denuclearization --- may not have to be exactly simultaneous. But it can be done roughly at the same time, if enough progress will have been made irreversibly and verifiably.

I would like to say to Mr. Kim: The DPRK's nuclear weapons already are a "white elephant."

Neither side needs an extended era of confrontation and tension. The Obama presidency offers a new opportunity to address and resolve the issues of conflicting interests and legitimate security concerns between the DPRK and the United States.

IV. 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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