Response to “The Significance of Clinton’s Visit to North Korea”

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Policy Forum Online 09-065A: August 11th, 2009

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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay, " The Significance of Clinton's Visit to North Korea " by Tong Kim, Adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University SAIS and a visiting professor at the University of North Korean Studies, which appeared as Policy Forum Online 09-065A: August 11th, 2009.

This response includes comments by Ed Martin, an international business lawyer with 45 years of experience involving Northeast Asia.

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 Ed Martin

Transcending the North Korea Impasse

North Korea's release of two Korean-American journalists arrested and convicted for alleged violation of its border with China reinforces the report in Choe Sang-Hun's July 28th New York Times article, "N. Korea Says It's Open to Dialogue", that North Korea is "open to new discussions to help resolve the dispute over its nuclear weapons program", albeit in bilateral talks with the United States, not in the six-nation talks involving China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia. President Obama should boldly seize this opportunity to "reset" the paralyzed conflict resolution process relating to North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles that he inherited from his predecessor.

To accomplish this, President should discard the self-crippling conditionality that precluded progress during the past eight years. To begin with, two counterproductive self-imposed conditions should be discarded.

The first is the perspective attributed to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Mark Landler's and Peter Baker's August 6th New York Times article, "Bill Clinton and Journalist Return From North Korea", that "the future of the United States' relationship with Pyongyang…was "'really up to them'". We should reexamine the wisdom of conceding control of consequential circumstances to our adversaries and focus on the positive actions we can take to achieve our national objectives.

The second, as reported in Choe Sang-Hun's July 28th article, the Secretary of State "reiterated over the weekend that Washington wants the North's nuclear problem to be handled and resolved through six-party talks." This perspective ignores the realities that the significant progress achieved during the Clinton administration was based on direct discussions with North Korea, and that the disastrous course of events during the past eight years, which included North Korea's development and testing of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, occurred in response to the Bush administration's mindless refusal to continue those discussions. The overriding dynamic is that since the mid-1990's, the Kim Jung Il regime has treated comprehensive conflict resolution with the United States as the lynchpin for normalization of its relationship with the world. It makes no sense whatsoever for us to ignore this compelling fact.

To thaw the frozen conflict resolution process, senior U.S. representatives should, after consulting the four other participants in the six-nation talks, meet with North Korean officials at an early date to initiate open-ended discussions without preconditions. In those discussions, the United States should propose restoring the 1994 Agreed Framework as the foundation for a "grand bargain" to achieve the objectives contemplated by that document, which included a freeze, safe storage under International Atomic Energy Agency inspection, and future dismantlement and destruction of North Korea's nuclear assets when two replacement light water reactors are provided; full normalization of political and economic relations which would entail a peace treaty ending the Korean War; elimination of onerous barriers to trade and investment; initial opening of liaison offices in each other's capital followed by upgrade of bilateral relations to the ambassadorial level; and formal U.S. assurance against the threat or use of nuclear weapons. To underscore U.S. determination to expedite a "grand bargain", the proposal could include the immediate establishment of reciprocal diplomatic representative offices and relaxation of restrictions on travel, communications, trade in non-strategic goods and services, and routine financial transactions.

If this initiative yields substantive results, the elements of agreement reached could provide a template for extending their application to the four other members of the six-party talks, with appropriate adjustments to address additional individual and group issues. Failure to act smartly now could result in an unfortunate "lost opportunity" and perpetuate an unsustainable crisis on the Korean peninsula.

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)

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