

Response to “Vietnam’s Model for North Korea”

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Policy Forum Online 08-062A: August 12th, 2008
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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay, " [Vietnam's Model for North Korea](#) " by Michael E. O'Hanlon, Senior Foreign Policy Fellow at the Brookings Institution, which appeared as Policy Forum Online 08-062A: August 12th, 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

In his article "Vietnam's Model for North Korea," O'Hanlon sounds ignorant of why the Kim Jong Il Government has acquired long-range nuclear strike capability. His proposal of the Vietnam model is putting the cart before the horse, probably due to his poor knowledge of the key reason why China and Vietnam have succeeded in their market economy.

The topmost consideration is national security. For Kim Jong Il, the American nukes are nothing but the root cause of Korea's division and the most serious threat to the peace and security of the Korean Peninsula. Kim Jong Il notes that the US nuking of Hiroshima and Nagasaki produced the most tragic consequence for the Korean nation. The Russian approval of the 1945 division of the Korean nation along the 38th Parallel was a by-product of the atomic bombing of the two Japanese cities. The Russians shrank from forcing the Americans to accept their plan to occupy Hokkaido and divide Japan in two zones in the wake of WWII.

O'Hanlon seems unaware that no country becomes a nuclear weapons state in order to extract aid or increase trade and investment. He appears to have no idea of what it is like for the people of a tiny North Korea to have lived under the shadow of the constant US threat of nuclear extinction for more than half a century into the 21st century.

Kim Jong Il thought it of critical importance to counteract the American nuclear sword of Damocles hanging over Korea. Necessity is the mother of invention. He has tapped all the available resources of Korea to build global nuclear strike capability, reducing the US nuclear arsenal to a "paper arsenal" as the Washington Post puts it October 16, 2006. The New York Times May 8, 2005 notes: "Either way, North Korea demonstrates a truth of the second nuclear age: The political power of atomic weapons no longer rests on the size of your stockpile... a half-dozen weapons are as good as 5,200, the current (if shrinking) size of America's operational arsenal."

Ironic indeed it is not lack of money or food but the US policy of hostility, the US nuclear threat that has created and driven the nuclear weapons program in the DPRK, helping it gatecrash the elite nuclear club. It is the US nuclear threat and harsh sanctions calculated to drive the Korean people insane and engineer the downfall of their government that have generated in them an obsession with unity and survival. In other words, the US policy of hostility is the genesis of a closely-knit socio-political unity and cohesion around two great leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Their adoration of the two Kims' astute leadership has kept the Korean people together, sane, and confident of their future.

The two leaders have jealously protected the Korean people and kept them out of harm's way by building a national fortress capable of withstanding a nuclear onslaught and torching the mainland USA with nuclear-tipped missiles. It is no exaggeration to say that the Korean people are greatest beneficiaries of Kim Jong Il military-first policy. But for it, the Korean Peninsula would be a second Iraq.

The US refusal to delist North Korea may satisfy the critics of Bush's policy reversal but will turn out senseless in the final analysis. It will leave Phase Two of the nuclear agreement unfinished, halting the disablement process. The DPRK will retain its nuclear capability intact, not to mention its long-range ballistic missile force.

The chief reason why China and Vietnam have succeeded in economic reconstruction is the disappearance of their state of war with the US. The two countries never reduced their conventional force or missile force before launching their economic reform. Never did they improve their human rights records. Never did the US insist that China renounce its nuclear arsenal before its economic reform.

China embarked on the market economy experiment in 1979 after the US ended its hostile policy to Beijing, as illustrated by the 1972 Nixon visit to Beijing and the 1979 establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the US. The Chinese Communist Party strengthened its grip on power.

The Vietnamese did not launch out on any major economic reform to take advantage of the end of the Vietnam War with the US but invaded Cambodia in 1979. Belatedly in 1986 the Vietnamese market economy experiment began but failed to produce any fruit, burdened by the 10-year-long Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. The Vietnamese began to succeed in economic experiment in 1990 only after they ended the costly military involvement in Cambodia. The Vietnamese economy continued to grow as the US started to improve relations with the former enemy in 1991, authorized US companies to open offices in it in 1992 and cleared the way for international lending to it in 1993, lifted the trade embargo in 1994. Vietnam and the US normalized bilateral relations in 1995. As in the case with China, the Vietnamese Communist Party kept its authority unchallenged.

Before establishing diplomatic relations with the DPRK, none of the European allies of the US such as Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy and Canada demanded the renunciation of nuclear weapons, reduction of conventional force and improvement of human rights.

Only after the US shows in a complete, verifiable and irreversible way that the US is no longer hostile to Pyongyang, the Kim Jong Il Administration will consider renouncing its nuclear deterrence. Signing a peace treaty, establishing diplomatic relations and supply of light-water reactors will go a long way, but they are not enough. Experience bespeaks that the only guiding rule in dealing with the Americans is the principle of action for action.

III. Response to the comments by Kim Myong Chol by Michael E. O'Hanlon

As Mike Mochizuki and I explain in our book, diplomatic relations, arms control that is binding on all sides, and security guarantees with obligations to all sides should also be part of any deal that focused on nuclear weapons as well as economic reform in North Korea. Mr. Kim and I may disagree radically in our view of history, but perhaps we do not totally disagree about what would have to be part of any negotiation between Pyongyang, Washington, and others.

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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