

Hawk Engagement: A Dangerous Turn in US Plans for North Korea

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The recent appointment of Victor Cha as Asia Director in the National Security Council portends a more aggressive approach towards North Korea during President Bush's second term. Long an advisor to the Administration, as Asia Director, Cha will hold responsibility for developing U.S. policy towards North Korea, and it will be he who maps out the approach to the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK - North Korea) in the coming months.

Selig Harrison, Director of the Asia Program at the Center for International Policy, visited the DPRK in the spring of 2004, where he met with high-ranking officials. Harrison "found the North Korean leadership extremely eager to find a way to conclude a nuclear deal with the United States. They need such a deal urgently because North Korea embarked on significant economic reforms in the middle of 2002, and these have intensified the economic pressures that confront its leadership." Consequently, they want to improve relations with the United States. Harrison said that although the North Korean leadership is "very eager for settlement," they are "not prepared to do it in the way the Bush Administration is asking them to do it. The North Koreans say that Washington wants them to, in effect, simply roll over and disarm unilaterally." Harrison felt that the Bush Administration has "a very rigid position," and is "not prepared to trade anything." That approach, he added, "risks a war. The point is, the Administration's objective is really regime change in Pyongyang."

This policy was epitomized in Victor Cha, who Harrison described as "kind of the ideologue of the Bush Administration" on the subject of Korean affairs - and this even before his appointment to the NSC. Cha's book on North Korea, Harrison said, "lays it all out: the purpose of negotiating with North Korea is not to settle anything," because in Cha's eyes it presents a threat to South Korean and American interests. "You have these multilateral negotiations in Beijing simply to show to the other parties in the region - China, South Korea, Russia and Japan - that it is not possible to make any deals with North Korea. He says the purpose of the negotiations is to mobilize a 'coalition for punishment'." The goal of talks, therefore, is not conflict resolution but to build a multinational coalition backing sanctions or military action. Cha has argued that "engagement is the best practical way to build a coalition for punishment tomorrow. A necessary precondition for the U.S. coercing North Korea is the formation of a regional consensus that efforts to resolve the problem in a non-confrontational manner have been exhausted. Without this consensus, implementing any form of coercion that actually puts pressure on the regime is unworkable." The policy Cha terms "hawk engagement," is only a means to an end. For Cha, "engagement does not operate without an exit strategy, engagement is the exit strategy."

President Bush came very close to actually launching an attack on North Korea in the spring of 2003. In March the U.S. moved a fleet of ships to the region, including the aircraft carrier

USS Carl Vinson with its 75 aircraft. In preparation for the attack, 6 F-117 Stealth bombers were sent to South Korea and 25 F-15 Fighters and 24 B-1 and B-52 bombers were stationed in Guam. Plans to conduct air strikes were in place, Bush admitted to South Korean Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Pan Ki-Mun one year later. The danger of war was averted during the U.S.-South Korean summit in Washington in May 2003, when South Korean officials strenuously objected to the plan. As in 1994, the American public never knew just how close the U.S. came to war on the Korean Peninsula in 2003. South Korean opposition to military action only strengthened the Bush Administration's conviction that it would be necessary to demonstrate the futility of negotiations before it could win the support of regional allies. It felt it could best accomplish that goal by presenting an image of negotiating without actually doing so.

In each of the first two six-party talks with North Korea, James Kelly, head of the U.S. delegation, was instructed not to negotiate. As a result, the meetings were little more than an exercise in futility. Russian, Chinese, South Korean and Japanese diplomats expressed their displeasure with Washington's stubborn refusal to engage in real negotiations. China's deputy foreign minister, Zhou Wenzhong, appealed to the U.S. to stop using its accusation of a North Korean uranium enrichment weapons program as an excuse for obstructing negotiations. "We know nothing about the uranium program," Zhou said. "We don't know whether it exists. So far the U.S. has not presented convincing evidence of this program." Zhou pointed out that if such a program did exist, then it should be included in any agreement, but that the U.S. should stop making accusations unless it could offer conclusive proof.

The North Korean position, as articulated by its foreign minister, Paek Nam-Sun, was that if the United States would produce evidence, then the DPRK "would certainly show" suspected sites, "as was the case with the Kumchangni incident." The reference was to an occasion in 1999 when the U.S. claimed to have solid evidence that a nuclear weapon facility was operating in a cave located at Kumchangni, and charged the DPRK with violating its treaty obligations. The U.S. pressured North Korea into allowing inspectors into the area, only to find nothing more than an empty cave.

Examples such as this, as well as the deliberate lies about Iraqi weapons programs used to justify invasion tended to leave third parties skeptical of overheated accusations and claims of evidence which are never produced. One Asian diplomat, requesting anonymity, said what was on the minds of many. "We think the U.S. claims are a little exaggerated, not as much as with Iraq, but still we have to be careful of what the U.S. says." Cognizant of the perception that it was as an obstacle to progress, the Bush Administration decided that it should present a plan. Administration officials admitted privately that the chaos in Iraq had changed the dynamics of the nuclear dispute with North Korea and that it was necessary to be seen by its allies as submitting a serious offer, even one that included conditions they knew the DPRK would refuse. One U.S. official admitted, "They may say no - and in that case they will have failed the test," confirming that the Administration viewed the process as a means of convincing its allies that talks were useless and that more hostile measures would eventually be necessary.

At the last round of talks, in June 2004, the U.S. delegation refrained from using the phrase "complete, verifiable and irreversible," which the North Koreans had begun to find increasingly offensive. Instead lead negotiator James Kelly proposed a new two-stage plan, in which the DPRK would first commit to dismantle all nuclear programs, whether peaceful

or related to weapons production. This also would include the highly enriched uranium program that the U.S. was still insisting was real, but which the North Koreans always denied existed. In this first stage, North Korea would be given three months to “provide a complete listing of all its nuclear activities and cease operation of all of its nuclear activities; permit the securing of all fissile material and the monitoring of all fuel rods, and; permit the publicly disclosed and observable disablement of all nuclear weapons/weapons components and key centrifuge parts.”

All of these actions would take place under “international,” by which was meant U.S., supervision and verification. In exchange, other nations, but not the U.S., would resume shipments of heavy fuel oil to North Korea. Provisional multilateral security assurances by the U.S. and the other parties would be offered, stating that the five nations harbored “no intention to invade or attack” the DPRK. As a provisional statement of intent, it could be withdrawn at any time prior to the total dismantlement of all nuclear programs. Furthermore, officials of the Bush Administration indicated, a security guarantee would not mean committing never to seek regime change. Nations other than the U.S. would “begin a study to determine the energy requirements of the DPRK and how to meet them by non-nuclear energy programs.” They would also “begin a discussion of steps necessary to lift remaining economic sanctions on the DPRK, and the steps necessary for removal of the DPRK from the List of State Sponsors of Terrorism.” This discussion would focus on a series of further demands on North Korea, such as a reduction in its conventional military forces and an end to missile development. Although Western news reports on the plan claimed that the U.S. would be involved in those discussions, James Kelly himself specifically ruled that out. Speaking before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Kelly emphasized that “as the DPRK carried out its commitments, the other parties”- meaning South Korea, China, Russia and possibly Japan - would implement the “corresponding steps.” It is probable, however, that behind the scenes the U.S. would direct how its allies approached the dialogue. The only U.S. commitment would be its inclusion in the five-party provisional security guarantee.

What is most striking about the first phase of the plan is that the U.S. would essentially undertake no meaningful obligations. Meanwhile, the DPRK would be compelled to identify and stop all of its nuclear operations, and permit U.S. personnel to take control of every element of its programs. Were the plan to collapse at mid-point, North Korea’s nuclear material would have been secured and the Pentagon would have the bombing coordinates for every facility related to nuclear research and development. Presumably during the three-month preparatory phase, U.S. monitors would also be busily engaged in marking additional targets while guests of the DPRK.

Failure by North Korea to provide a list of facilities engaged in uranium enrichment would cancel the agreement, thereby triggering the automatic withdrawal of the provisional security guarantee. Given that there is no evidence that such a program ever existed, it may be concluded that the plan was intended to fail, but only after obtaining a wealth of intelligence data on North Korea. In return for handing over control of nuclear material to the U.S. and the coordinates of its operations to Pentagon planners, the DPRK would receive nothing substantive in return other than temporary shipments of heavy fuel oil from other nations. Aside from that solitary concrete commitment, there was only the promise to “begin a study,” and the expectation of “discussions” about additional concessions the DPRK would have to make before yet more discussions could take place.

In the second and final step of the American plan, North Korea would proceed to dismantle

every element of its nuclear programs, and the multilateral security guarantee would be made permanent once that process was complete. The U.S. plan was little more than a more detailed rehash of previous demands, as Kelly affirmed one month later before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: "First, we seek the complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of the DPRK's nuclear programs - nothing less." The plan, admitted a high-ranking official in the Bush Administration, was only a "repackaging and elaboration of things we have said before." It was said that the plan had been developed in response to South Korean and Japanese concerns, and represented an exercise in "alliance management."

U.S. negotiators behaved as if there was nothing amiss in their demand for North Korea to abandon plans for the peaceful development of nuclear energy. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was critical of that approach, and felt it necessary to point out the obvious. "We consider that the DPRK, as any sovereign state, has a full right - in accordance with international law - to develop peaceful nuclear power. Toward this end, of course, it is necessary that the DPRK return to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons and fully restore its participation in the IAEA, including the signing of an additional protocol on inspections." The head of the Russian delegation at the six-party talks, Aleksandar Alekseyev, expressed similar sentiments. "No one has the right to ban peaceful nuclear programs. This goes against international law." The Russians were, in fact, correct. According to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, "peaceful applications of nuclear technology...should be available for peaceful purposes to all Parties of the Treaty, whether nuclear-weapon or non-nuclear weapon States."

Plans called for the six parties to meet again in late September, but hopes quickly faded as relations between the U.S. and DPRK continued to sour. The primary trigger that set off the chain of events leading to the dissolution of the talks was a statement by James Kelly before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on July 15. "Of course, to achieve full integration into the region and a wholly transformed relationship with the United States, North Korea must take other steps in addition to making the strategic decision to give up its nuclear ambitions. It also needs to change its behavior on human rights, address the issues underlying its appearance on the U.S. list of states sponsoring terrorism, eliminate its illegal weapons of mass destruction programs, put an end to the proliferation of missiles and missile-related technology, and adopt a less provocative conventional force disposition." Responding to questions from senators, Kelly emphasized, "We've made clear that normalization of our relations would have to follow these other important issues." Here was a clear signal that even an agreement and full implementation on denuclearization would not bring about a normalization of relations between the two countries. The North Koreans were dismayed at the prospect that they were expected to bargain away all of their chips only to be faced with a series of further demands and the maintenance of hostile relations. What the DPRK sought above all else was a normalization of relations between the two nations, and Kelly's statement was taken as an indication of a lack of good will.

The highly lauded U.S. plan, then, was little more than a ruse. It was never meant to lead to a genuine negotiated settlement of differences with the DPRK. Any future talks appear destined for failure, given the Bush Administration's "hawk engagement" approach, in which negotiations are intended to fail in order to build support for coercive and violent measures. The DPRK has recently indicated its willingness to resume negotiations, but says that it wants coexistence and asks the U.S. to drop its hostile approach so that meaningful dialogue may take place. The direction of events take on the Korean Peninsula will depend

in large measure on the ability of the other parties to the talks – Russia, China, Japan and above all South Korea – to rein in the worst excesses of the Bush Administration without antagonizing it to the point where it decides to take unilateral military action against North Korea. Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is continued stalemate throughout President Bush's second term, but the appointments of Condoleezza Rice as Secretary of State and Victor Cha as Asia Director in the NSC warn of darker possibilities.

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