

Neocons on North Korea: “No Carrots, Only Sticks!”

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Given the lamentable diplomatic performance since 2001 by the Bush administration vis-à-vis North Korea, it would be premature to rejoice at Washington’s recent *volte face*. The oversold February 13th “breakthrough” with North Korea is only a preliminary step. The pact obligates the U.S. to remove North Korea from its list of terror-sponsoring states, and to lift financial sanctions against Pyongyang. The U.S. has also pledged 300 million in “eventual” energy and financial aid, which has earned it plaudits from many of its critics. Thus far, Pyongyang has pledged to shut down and seal its plutonium-producing nuclear facility at Yongbyon in less than two months, and to allow verification by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors who were kicked out of the country in 2002. UN Inspectors have already been invited to Pyongyang, with Mohammed ElBaradei due to appear there in March. New working groups are being scheduled toward a comprehensive agreement to prevent North Korea from starting another uranium enrichment program, but the pitfalls are many. So many, in fact, that to call this deal a “diplomatic victory” is premature.

While China and South Korea deserve most of the credit for this deal, the U.S. is also credited — and correctly — with showing greater flexibility in recent months. In fact, the February 13th deal represents an about-face from the hard-line policy that prevailed before Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill were given more latitude by Washington.

Even the *éminence grise* of the Bush White House, Vice President Dick Cheney, has approved the deal, despite his hostility to the North Korean regime. Despite steadfast opposition by the US to bilateral negotiations, the February 13th deal was secured after chief negotiator Christopher Hill and Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye Gwan had a *tête-à-tête* in Berlin. Clearly, a bizarre flip-flop has occurred.

What lies behind this flexibility? Since the six-party talks began four years ago, the inflexibility of the Bush administration has brought Sisyphean results. The culmination of the sort of diplomacy which values ultimatums and “diplomatic pressure” over dialogue was a nuclear test on October 9th 2006 by a new self-declared nuclear weapons state (NWS).

Commentators have speculated that this deal was welcomed by the White House because of the unwelcome current debate on Iraq policy, but we must delve more deeply. While the agreement on its face seems to offer both parties considerable gains, the time frame in this step-by-step process make the deal asymmetrical. North Korea has promised to deliver more at an early stage, while in the short run, U.S. obligations are modest indeed. It is noteworthy that it is South Korea, not the U.S., which must ship the initial 50,000 tonnes of heavy fuel oil (HFO) to the North.² Of course, this modest shipment by Seoul will occur only after the Yongbyon reactor is closed down. Pyongyang must also patiently endure a long wait to determine whether the U.S. truly intends to “eventually” normalize relations in the

long run.

This asymmetry is less obvious to us because of our paternalism toward the “Kim regime”. For their part, however, the North Koreans are not naïve negotiators: they long recognized that, without a bargaining chip, Washington will pay no attention to them. When North Korea tested a nuclear weapon four months ago, many commentators responded with the neocon reflex, warning us not to succumb to “nuclear blackmail” — we should “not reward” the rogue state for the bad behavior as represented by its October 9th declaration. Of course, before this date, the same people were adamantly against ordinary “blackmail,” in the vain hope that banking sanctions and other forms of diplomatic pressure would hasten the demise of the Korean government. To date, U.S. negotiators have felt more pressure from their partners in the six-party talks than from Pyongyang: Russia and China have threatened to publicly blame the U.S. if the Bush administration did not show more flexibility during a number of missed opportunities in recent years.

Meanwhile, much journalistic commentary assumes that Washington bargains in good faith, and that it is only Kim Jong-il who might merely be playing for time.¹ However, the diplomatic record does not support the view that the North Koreans have a monopoly on bad faith bargaining. Despite recent setbacks to the White House, cooler heads do not yet prevail in the neocon-dominated Bush entourage. Given that the pragmatist faction that prevails in Pyongyang still faces US hard-liners, is this deal really the first step to a truly comprehensive agreement that will make the Korean peninsula a nuclear weapons free zone?

Prior to this deal, the Bush administration had achieved no foreign policy triumphs whatsoever. The main problem, however, is not that this deal could have been achieved in 2003, or that we are behind schedule because the Bush people did not pick up where the Democrats left off, as partisan critics charge. The problem is that, given the inevitability that the North Koreans will demand major concessions as the stakes get higher, the chances for setbacks will correspondingly multiply. One likely stumbling block concerns the alternative energy source that North Korea requires, which was previously promised under the 1994 AF: the provision of two light-water reactors (LWRs) which are less prone to nuclear conversion. The LWRs were promised, but not constructed, by President Clinton. Interestingly, he was under pressure from many of the same hard-liners now ascendant in Washington.

Many of the neoconservatives were true to form in denouncing even this modest deal. The immediate reaction of former UN Amb. John Bolton was to urge President Bush to reject the deal, labeling it a “charade.”³ During his tenure, Bolton’s aversion to diplomacy was less rational than visceral: he now characteristically avers that this deal “sends the wrong signal” to proliferators around the world. Bolton stated that such rogue states should merely “do what must be done” (read: do as we say, not as we do).

In 2003, when Bolton was U.S. Undersecretary Of State for Arms Control and International Security, he often revealed the mind-set of the far rightists around Bush. He warned North Korea, Iran, and Syria to abandon any programs producing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), remarking at a news conference on April 9, 2003 that “we are hopeful that a number of regimes will draw the appropriate lesson [from regime change] in Iraq that the pursuit of WMD is not in their interest.”⁴ Only unreconstructed hawks can discern a silver lining in the smoke-filled clouds over Iraq, while expecting the rest of the world to simply genuflect to American power.

Eliot Abrams, a high-level NSC advisor, was apoplectic in his opposition to the deal: “The pressure was what brought North Korea to the table originally. Why get rid of the pressure?” This is an oft-recycled doctrine: that pressure alone will bring results, usually unspecified. When the anti-diplomat speaks, he delivers ultimatums; when he acts, it is merely to send tough signals, such as Washington’s shipment of fifteen fighter-bombers to South Korea in mid-2005.⁵ In April of 2003, a memo from former Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was leaked to the *New York Times*: it called for “regime change” in North Korea. Two months later, Pentagon advisor Richard Perle remarked that a preemptive “surgical strike” against the Yongbyon facility was a viable option.⁶

For Pyongyang, the Bush administration represented an alarming shift from Clinton’s policy of “benign neglect” to a more malign version. In the last days of the Clinton period, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang to meet Kim Jong-Il. In October, 2000, in a sunny climate of official recognition by the United States, Kim responded with a carrot: informing her that Pyongyang would conduct no further missile tests. Mrs. Albright concluded that the United States could do business with North Korea. A visit from President Clinton was planned, but was cut short by the end of his term. Then came George W. Bush, and the rhetorical lumping together of North Korea with Iraq and Iran into an “axis of evil,” which inspired a flurry of back-and-forth anti-diplomatic epithets in lieu of dialogue.

Under Clinton, Pyongyang came close to signing a moratorium on missile production, yet soon resumed test firing missiles into the Sea of Japan under Bush. For U.S. hard-liners, this contrasting behavior taught no lessons. Previously, neoconservatives expected threats and sanctions to remove all designated rogues from the board, yet the Bush policy of “threat escalation” only escalated the threats posed by these regimes. Has Washington really learned from recent history?

Clearly, North Korea will punish anti-diplomacy and reward conciliation. At this point it is obvious that negotiations can work with North Korea — the regime wants to come in from the cold — but success is predicated upon both sides taking the requisite steps to build confidence along the way.

North Korea has been unambiguous in asserting that everything is on the table. (Ironically, when North Korea makes this declaration, it is a pledge; when U.S. neoconservatives do so, it is a threat.) Yet the trustworthiness of North Korean promises can only be proved or disproved if they are pursued.

In 1994, the Clintonites signed onto the Agreed Framework not because Washington shared Pyongyang’s eagerness for normalized relations but because it recognized (with a little help from Jimmy Carter) that the alternative would be a devastating war. The Clinton era taught a bipartisan lesson: that North Korea will go to the brink when offered only ultimatums, but will also make concessions in response to some proactive diplomacy.

One hopes that the September 13th “breakthrough” reflects a belated recognition by Bush’s hard-liners of the benefits of pragmatism. This deal may prove to be a first step away from diplomatic inertia and confrontation in favor of negotiations (in stark contravention of neocon principles). On the other hand, the new negotiating framework could also cave-in at any stage, and become the mere prelude to a new stage of regression.

Granted: the Bush administration has permitted some limited progress at this point. But it would not be unprecedented and should not be surprising if a major diplomatic

breakthrough worthy of the name is prorogued until the next administration completes its policy review in 2009, while a less patient world watches, waits, and worries.

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NOTES

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