

North Korea: Breakthrough or Breakout?

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The June 26 breakthrough — when North Korea submitted a 60-page declaration of its plutonium production program — was a just cause for celebration, but the DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) omitted any mention of uranium. And it now refuses to take any further steps toward the adoption of a comprehensive verification protocol for its nuclear weapons program.

There is a context within which to view the current standoff. North Korea has consistently practiced carrot and stick diplomacy: rewarding the US when it makes a concession, punishing it when it resorts to name-calling and stonewalling in lieu of diplomatic engagement. Having shown a willingness to take concrete steps toward denuclearization, North Korea now expects some concrete actions from the US before it continues to comply with Western demands, in a lengthy list that includes the North’s alleged technology transfers to Syria.

Pyongyang wants to be immediately de-listed as a terrorist state. As a result, both sides have declared the other to be in violation of the accord. In Western commentary, it is standard journalistic practice to depict such stumbling blocks as evidence of the unpredictability of the isolated rogue state. This frame is doubtlessly delightful to high US officials, whether diplomats or neoconservative anti-diplomats. The Western media takes it for granted that Pyongyang cannot be trusted, which is plausible enough, but also that our side can always be trusted.

In June, when both sides began taking concrete steps pursuant to their agreement, commentary depicted this welcome development as a vindication of the Bush administration’s “tough diplomacy.” Some tactical criticism could also be found — but always from the Right, with journalists functioning as a right-wing echo chamber for the neoconservatives. The Bush administration was criticized with warnings that we must not “reward” the regime in Pyongyang by removing it from its list of states that sponsor terrorism. This paternalistic bent is the unacknowledged source of much friction, and numerous setbacks.

Unsurprisingly, the neoconservatives were apoplectic at the policy reversal. In a recent interview, former UN Ambassador John Bolton remarked that he “doesn’t do carrots” — only sticks. The US State Department had always been subordinate to the Pentagon during the tenure of the second President Bush, whose administration suddenly opened the door for a number of commercial transactions with the North, leaving Cuba, Iran, Syria, and Sudan as the remaining countries condemned by the US as state sponsors of terrorism.

A considerable amount of symbolism attached to the recent breakthrough. The US had

already supervised the reactor's disablement last year, so the regime was merely using the media to great effect. When North Korea blew up the Yongbyon cooling tower on June 27, this action was largely for the benefit of TV cameras. Pyongyang invited all five nations involved in the six-party talks (the US, China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan) to observe the demolition — and Pyongyang's willingness to proffer a carrot.

The Western view of the beleaguered North is more ideological than historical. Our media resorts to an imperial frame of reference and echoes a paternalistic inclination in Western commentary and analysis. For example, in a recent debate televised on PBS, Selig Harrison, Washington-based director at the Center for International Policy, called attention to this blinkered viewpoint. His interlocutor, Chuck Downs of the Commission for Human Rights in North Korea, differed with Harrison's charge that the Bush administration had been responsible for years of null progress before the breakthrough, that is, before Condoleezza Rice and chief negotiator Chris Hill were finally allowed more latitude in negotiations. Downs countered that, *pace* Selig Harrison, "this is a crisis created and managed by Kim Jong Il..." Downs goes on to lament that the Trading with the Enemy Act that has

protected U.S. companies from North Korean scams has been lifted... [and] the terrorism listing of North Korea, which has been in place for 20 years, since 1988, will be lifted at the end of 45 days... North Korea will have access to international loans as a result of what the president did today. And we have to hope that they will actually comply.

Mr. Harrison responded to Downs' rebuttal by accurately characterizing it:

Now, he talks about North Korea as if it's a defendant in the dock in a trial and they have to prove themselves. In fact, what we've got here is distrust between two countries going back to the Korean War and the Cold War, in which North Korea doesn't trust us, [and] we don't trust them. This agreement provides for both sides to take steps simultaneously, tit-for-tat, action-for-action...

As noted, the paternalism toward North Korea that Mr. Harrison cites is the source of many muddled analyses here.

Recently, the State Department gained ascendancy, to the consternation of the hawks, as Dr. Rice desperately seeks a diplomatic coup before leaving office. Last-minute attempts at forthright diplomacy brought about a real breakthrough, one that is now in peril, as Pyongyang is threatening to halt the disablement of its main reactor. The pattern is clear: North Korea will either reward forthright diplomacy or punish diplomatic inertia.

The ostensible goal of the six-party talks was to curb North Korea's "nuclear ambitions," although Pyongyang's main "ambition" was to secure regime survival after being labeled part of an "axis of evil," along with Iran and Iraq. Only extreme rightists fail to acknowledge such obvious facts, or denounce analysts as supporters of the miscreant rogue for so doing. In the debate cited earlier, Chuck Downs declared that "North Korea has really not given us anything in exchange for the real benefits..."— of course, Pyongyang is currently making the same charge against the US.

"The US is gravely mistaken if it thinks it can make a house search in the DPRK as it pleases

just as it did in Iraq,” Are these the ravings of an isolated and paranoid regime? Or is it the case that, because the regime does not rely upon the Western media for its worldview, it understands perfectly well that the Bush administration, like their hard-line counterparts in Pyongyang, respect nothing but force: the rest is not silence, but hot air.

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