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Getting Serious about a Multilateral Approach to North Korea

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by

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Since the most recent North Korean nuclear crisis flared up in October 2002, the Bush administration has sought to deflect attention from North Korea's demands for bilateral negotiations, properly emphasizing the need for a multilateral approach. It has argued convincingly that North Korean efforts to develop a nuclear weapons capability are a problem not only for the United States, but also for all of North Korea's neighbors, including particularly South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan.

However, while the Bush administration has "talked the talk" of multilateralism in the past year-and-a-half, it has made only faint efforts to "walk the walk." Instead, it has used the multilateral forum mainly for diplomatic shadow-boxing, rather than actually dealing with North Korea on substantive issues. Unfortunately, this strategy has not only met resistance from its partners in the Six-Party Talks, but, more importantly, it has failed thus far to make meaningful progress toward the U.S. goal—the nuclear disarmament of North Korea.

Achieving the administration's own end game of a "peaceful diplomatic solution" will require a different approach. While the February 2004 round of the Six-Party Talks generated some evidence of cooperation among the five states seeking to change North Korea behavior, the plan provided was limited, supported by only three of the parties, and

failed to include a clear step-by-step framework to ending the North Korean nuclear program and establishing a long-term settlement on the Korean Peninsula. This must change. First, the United States needs to get serious about working out a strong, united strategy with its friends and allies. Second, it needs to convene real talks, including multilateral discussions on matters of substance that are blocking progress on an immediate nuclear freeze. This means engaging the North. The primary goal should first be to freeze and shut down the plutonium-based program at Yongpyong. The secondary goal must be to provide concrete evidence of the uranium-based program (which may not be very far advanced and certainly constitutes less of a threat) and shut it down. Lack of progress on the second goal should not halt progress on the first, more important objective. Continuing the political theatrics that still dominate the talks benefits neither side. Worse, it allows North Korea to move ever-closer to a bomb using its known capabilities using plutonium reprocessing.

While U.S. negotiators seem unwilling to admit it, what has become clear from U.S. contacts with North Korea over the past decade is that it will not be possible to settle the nuclear problem, at least peacefully, in isolation from other issues. There is a growing consensus among experts that a more comprehensive approach—including such issues as conventional military forces, trade, investment, humanitarian aid, energy, and political recognition—will be needed to achieve a long-term resolution of the nuclear question. Notably, Libya's and Iran's recent willingness to give up their WMD arsenals and open their facilities to inspectors were preceded by diplomatic negotiations with major European powers and the promise of acceptance back into the international community. This latter inducement implies substantial economic and security gains for

both states in the form of normalized commercial and diplomatic relations. These are far broader gains than the limited oil assistance promised in February by South Korea, with the support of China and Russia.

The Bush administration's current strategy in Northeast Asia neglects this more comprehensive approach and thus carries significant risks. As in Iraq, it greatly increases the likelihood that Washington will be left "holding the bag" for having failed to address the North Korean threat in a timely manner, including returning inspectors to the country, destroying the North Korean nuclear program, and reducing the immediate threat the program poses to U.S. troops and U.S. friends and allies. It may also prevent plans for reducing U.S. forces in South Korea, requiring instead a costly buildup. This would be a very unfortunate outcome for the United States, as well as other concerned countries.

The Bush administration would do well to reconsider its strategy—before it is too late and multiple nuclear weapons have been deployed. It has invested as much, if not more, diplomatic capital in squabbling with its allies and friends than it has to subduing Pyongyang's nuclear program. North Korea, meanwhile, reprocesses its plutonium unrestrained by any international accords. A more united strategy would strengthen a consensus that is now limited mainly to goals and make Pyongyang the odd man out in the Six-Party Talks, making North Korean compliance with the international community's preference for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula more likely.

Instead of hiding behind South Korea, China, and Russia, U.S. interests would be better served if Washington were to take the lead and begin to sketch out the range of specific contributions that it and other concerned parties can and should make to a multilateral settlement. This would ensure Pyongyang that Washington did not intend to

undermine any future settlement, but also spread the responsibility to five key regional actors that surround North Korea, making it more likely that they would get what they want from Pyongyang. The “cost” here, of course, would be actual engagement by Washington of its long-hated adversary, rather than keeping to its current policy of politically safe but practically ineffectual condemnations.

Such a strategy is not alien to the United States. Three Republican presidents—Nixon, Reagan and Bush—initiated and refined an engagement approach in their dealings with “Red” China and the former Soviet Union beginning in 1971. These Republican presidents reversed Democratic President Harry Truman’s policy of containment vis a vis communist states. Instead of striving for diplomatic and economic isolation, successive Republican administrations combined armed deterrence, multilateral diplomatic pressure and inducements (in the form of humanitarian assistance and the promise of normalized diplomatic and economic ties) to convince their communist adversaries to open themselves to the outside world. Obviously, the strategy proved successful. Today, China and Russia, plus most of their former communist allies, are undergoing radical transformations and have ceased to be threats to international peace and the security of the United States.

Similarly, a multilateral package of assets in the North Korean context, backed by multilateral pressure and armed deterrence, could not only help convince Pyongyang Korea to give up its weapons. It could also make it much more likely that any diplomatic agreement would succeed, by linking Pyongyang’s access to such benefits to its cooperation in increasing the transparency of its military activities, heightening international oversight of its nuclear and other activities (through the presence of multiple

actors in North Korea), and allowing the influx of private business. Such changes would also encourage the development of levers of influence over what is now a largely autarkic (albeit starving and dangerous) communist recluse.

This is the same multilateral diplomatic strategy that Pyongyang's immediate neighbors (South Korea, China, and Russia) now are striving to use to change North Korea. Actually, U.S. friends and allies could bring quite a lot to the table— beyond the limited carrot of oil assistance broached in February—something largely ignored in Washington. While the United States needs to engage itself by offering its fair share, the Bush administration should also examine what North Korea's four main neighbors and the European Union might bring to a more comprehensive solution to the Korean Peninsula crisis.

China—Local Leader?

China has played a valuable role as a go-between for Washington and Pyongyang over the past year, helping to set up the first Three-Party Talks in April and then the Six-Party Talks in August 2003. Largely unnoticed, at least in the U.S. media and the Bush administration, is China's effort to temper North Korea's tendency toward saber rattling and coercive diplomacy ("nuclear blackmail" as President Bush once labeled it). Beijing accomplished this by increasing Pyongyang's dependence on it for food, petroleum, technology, investment capital, and economic aid.

North Korea now receives about 20 percent of its food from China on very favorable terms. Beijing has quietly expanded the transfer of industrial know-how to North Korea by sponsoring a growing number of North Koreans at Chinese universities and technical schools. It continues to encourage Chinese investment in North Korea and

to subsidize bilateral trade. China has also teamed up with South Korea and Russia to hold out to North Korea the promise to modernize its railroads and to link them to Europe. This increasing interdependence gives Beijing significant, albeit not decisive leverage in Pyongyang.

In the security realm, China could play an especially important role. As Pyongyang's closest ally, China's pledges to guarantee North Korean security during a phased withdrawal of troops from the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) and eventual force reduction will be critical. Such assurances could be strengthened by the introduction of a limited contingent of Chinese troops to the DMZ itself, as a buffer against any feared invasion from the South.

South Korea—Engaging Already

South Korea has an abundance of everything North Korea needs to escape starvation and bankruptcy. Its engagement of North Korea since 1998 has virtually exploded. Close to 12,000 South Koreans, excluding tourists, visited North Korea in 2003, up from less than 1,000 only five years earlier. Most are involved in commercial trade, which is now approaching \$1 billion. Others are engaged in education and technology transfer, as well as cultural and social exchanges. South Korean computers and software have become standard throughout North Korea. A small, South Korean owned automobile assembly plant has been opened near Pyongyang, and some 250 small- and medium-sized South Korean firms have registered to set up shop in a large economic development zone near the North Korean city of Kaesong. To facilitate transportation between the zone and South Korea, roads through the DMZ have recently

been reconstructed and regularly scheduled air travel between the two Koreas resumed in September 2003.

South Korea's financial and technological domination of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization, or KEDO, give Seoul control over yet another potentially valuable asset in any "package solution" to the impasse with Pyongyang. Work by the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) has halted, and is not likely to resume construction of the two light-water nuclear reactors once planned under the Agreed Framework. But the trust that KEDO's staff built up in working with North Koreans remains credible. This trust could open a new role for KEDO in the dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear facilities, in the event of an agreement. Likewise, KEDO could assume responsibility for the construction of conventionally fueled power plants, a potential element in any future nuclear resolution.

Russia—Reemerging Player

Russia has long been a neglected potential partner in the pursuit of a peaceful end to the North Korean nuclear crisis. This is partly due to Russia's loss of leverage in Pyongyang after the demise of the Soviet Union and its economic aid, plus Russian President Boris Yeltsin's preference to do business with South Korea. Since 2001, President Vladimir Putin has repaired relations with North Korea and, like China, is pursuing a "balanced" policy toward the two Koreas. Putin's aims are purely pragmatic: using relations with North Korea to help further the Russian Far East's economic integration into Northeast Asia while restoring Russia as a major actor in the Asia-Pacific diplomatic arena. A stable and peaceful Korean Peninsula is imperative if Putin is to

accomplish these objectives. This requires keeping the peninsula free of war and nuclear weapons.

Absent his Soviet predecessors' economic and military resources, Putin has pursued a personal relationship with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. For Kim, his close relationship with Russia's leader partially restores what he lost after his father's death—the aura of superpower legitimacy as North Korea's leader. This is vital to Kim's efforts to manage his crusty and powerful generals. To further reinforce bilateral ties, Putin has promised North Korea potential economic gains. He has offered to assist in the modernization of North Korea's railroads and to allow them to link up with Russia's Trans-Siberian railroad en route to European markets. Also, Russia has held out to Pyongyang the promise of access to local joint ventures in agriculture and light industry.

Notably, Russia has offered security guarantees to both North and South Korea in the context of a future settlement. Moscow's good relations with both sides and with Washington might make Russian troops a mutually acceptable alternative to U.S. and North Korean forces on the DMZ in the context of a phased withdrawal. In addition, some Russian experts have suggested that Moscow could play a positive role in helping to dismantle North Korea's nuclear complex, particularly by taking custody of its fissile material for storage and eventual downblending.

Japan – Reluctant Suitor

The Japanese people, and to a lesser extent their government, would prefer that North Korea collapsed into the arms of South Korea. This may have motivated to stand on the side with the United States in the February round of the Six-Party Talks.

Unfortunately, events have shown that this is wishful thinking, both because of North

Korea's surprising tenacity and durability in the face of its economic obstacles and because of the preference of Beijing, Seoul, and Moscow to sustain and transform rather than dismantle the Kim Jong Il regime (given the likely costs of a sudden breakup to them).

Tokyo shares Washington's goal of disarming North Korea of its WMD, along with its Northeast Asian neighbors, but it parts company regarding strategy for achieving a peaceful resolution. Tokyo prefers to minimize the risk of war on the Korean Peninsula by exchanging with Pyongyang substantial economic inducements for compliance with multilateral demands. These include the "complete, verifiable, and irreversible" dismantlement of North Korea's entire WMD arsenal plus resolution of the emotionally charged abducted Japanese citizen issue.

Japan has indicated that Pyongyang's full compliance would gain it normalized diplomatic and commercial relations, upwards of \$10 billion in economic aid, and membership in the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Tokyo, as the ADB's major shareholder, is blocking North Korea's admission despite Beijing and Seoul's desires to admit Pyongyang. ADB membership would give North Korea access to low interest loans vital for the modernization of its dilapidated industrial infrastructure.

European Union—Potential Contributor

The European Union (EU) also may be inclined to contribute to a multilateral package to end North Korea's nuclear programs. Most EU members have normalized diplomatic relations with Pyongyang since 1998. They also have been major contributors to the international humanitarian effort to improve the food supply and quality of life for

North Koreans. Most recently, the EU opened a chamber of commerce in Pyongyang and is cautiously exploring possible economic ventures.

These developments have increased North Korea's dependence on the EU in several key areas. The Swiss have modernized North Korea's communications by installing a nation-wide fiber optic network. EU member companies have assisted North Korea in the exploration for possible oil and gas fields in the West Sea (Yellow Sea). Several dozen North Korean students are learning new agricultural and business techniques while studying in Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe.

North Korea's ties to the EU are considerably less substantial than those with its immediate neighbors, but they are growing and of increasing significance to Pyongyang's efforts to revitalize its economy.

A New Strategy for Washington

It is important for the United States to learn from its failed coalition building in Iraq by creating a more united front in the Six-Party Talks. The ability of each individual participant to influence North Korea's behavior is limited. In the absence of a coherent U.S. strategy with the other four, Pyongyang has played one capital off against another. It has been able to squeeze economic benefits from Beijing and Seoul in exchange for continuing participation in the six-party discussion without giving up anything substantial.

By adjusting its approach, Washington could assume leadership of the multilateral process, rather than relying on Seoul and Beijing. Pyongyang would then have to contend with a more persuasive and more capable bloc of countries.

The United States should begin by supporting the considerable leverage Russia, China, South Korea, Japan, and the EU have developed with North Korea. If the United States is fully engaged in a settlement, these partners can help convince North Korea that the top U.S. goal is not to dismantle the regime, but rather its nuclear program. The negotiations should put on the table for Pyongyang's view such items as multilateral security assurances with U.S. backing, normalized diplomatic and commercial ties, capital and technology to upgrade its infrastructure, membership in international financial institutions, access to the international market, and non-nuclear energy aid. These would not be "rewards" for past bad behavior, but instead a picture of how doing the right thing opens doors to normal inter-state relations and its benefits.

In exchange, however, North Korea would have to agree to the "complete, irreversible, and verifiable" elimination of its weapons of mass destruction programs. It would also have to understand that abrogation of such a pledge would end its access to the benefits of membership in the international community.

Conclusion: Past Miscalculations in Both Pyongyang and Washington

Kim Jong Il obviously misread the international community's reaction when he resumed his nuclear weapons programs. He apparently assumed that he could separate the Bush Administration from the international community. He was wrong. Beijing, Moscow, Seoul, Tokyo, and other major capitals share Washington's goal of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. Kim also underestimated the potential cost to his regime. In striving to "deter" the alleged U.S. nuclear threat, he put at risk all of his diplomatic and commercial gains with the international community, not just his neighbors. Without access to these benefits, Kim's regime cannot long endure.

However, Washington must also admit to itself that no nation in history has voluntarily disarmed without receiving concrete benefits in return. If the talks fail, the only remaining U.S. option is armed confrontation. In viewing Pyongyang, the Bush administration has mistakenly treated acquisition of nuclear weapons as North Korea's top goal. Instead, Kim Jong Il is interested first and foremost in the survival of his regime. If nuclear weapons are not needed to achieve that end, he will likely discard them for other, more reliable means of securing his future.

Current policies in both capitols are leading nowhere, putting the international community at unnecessary risk. Northeast Asia remains tense and a block on productive regional development. An alternative strategy has much to offer, and yet remains untested. The next few months will see if true leadership emerges or if more time is squandered.