

The Obama Administration's North Korea Policy

By

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President Barak Obama's foreign policy goals were determined by the reality he inherited from President George W. Bush. But Obama's view of the world, his personal philosophy and preferences are defining his foreign policy priorities and strategies. The Obama Administration's foreign policy in other words will pursue essentially the same goals as the Bush Administration, but assign different priorities and use different strategies. This is the context for the Obama Administration's approach to North Korea.

Global Priorities

The Obama White House web site, www.whitehouse.gov lists the administration's priorities. Foremost is dealing with the global financial crisis, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, international terrorism, and halting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) with particular emphasis on nuclear weapons.

President Obama and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton reflected these priorities in their official statements during the administration's initial 100 days. More than half of the president's statements dealt with domestic and international economic issues. Clinton's objective during her first official trip abroad to East Asia in February 2009 was to urge US allies Japan and South Korea to stimulate their economics with government spending just as the United States was preparing to do. Clinton then urged China to continue financing the United States enormous debt by purchasing and holding US government bonds. Before President Obama made his first trip abroad to Europe in April to attend the London G 20 Meeting, he issued statements that shifted US military priorities from Iraq to Afghanistan.¹

Next on the president's priority list is to "secure loose nuclear materials from terrorists, strengthen the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), and move toward a nuclear free world."² He reiterated this in Prague, Czech Republic on April 5, 2009, in a speech before a huge audience. He stated, "The existence of thousands of nuclear weapons is the most dangerous legacy of the Cold War," and, "... as a nuclear power, as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act. We cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it, we can start it." He promised that, "... we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy," and pledged to "negotiate a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with the Russians this year," a process he initiated with Russian President Medvedev on April 1 in London. At their London summit the world's most powerful men agreed to "support the activities of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) ..." and "... underscored the importance of the entering into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty."³

Also in Prague President Obama criticized North Korea's April 5 launch of a long range ballistic missile when he declared that Pyongyang had "broken the rules" and "Violations must be punished, ..." a reference to the UN Security Council's 2006 resolution 1718 that urged North Korea to halt development of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons.

He concluded, “North Korea must know that the path to security and respect will never come through threats and illegal weapons.”⁴

President Obama’s foreign policy priority is to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, not to improve relations with North Korea. In other words, his administration’s policy toward North Korea is a small part of a global approach to nuclear weapons proliferation.

Global Strategy and Tactics

Presidents Obama and Bush view the world from opposite poles. President Bush saw the United States as the world’s supreme military power and believed it should deploy this power to achieve its national interests, particularly regarding national security.⁵ Bush favored unilateral strategies because he believed multilateralism and international law diluted the United States’ military might and obstructed his ability to achieve what was best for the United States.⁶ He believed allies should follow and support the United States and had little patience with international organizations like the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

President Obama’s world view begins with the assumption that United States interests are better served by multilateral diplomacy and collective security. He has thus accented the repair of alliances, the development of partnerships in Asia, and the accenting of bilateral and multilateral negotiations to address issues such as North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, nuclear arms reduction with Russia, etc.⁷

Obama’s strategy is not necessarily a repetition of what President Clinton favored in the 1990s. Actually Obama’s strategy resembles that first developed during the Republican Nixon Administration as formulated by then National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Kissinger advocated “engagement” over “confrontation” while maintaining armed deterrence. Prior to this, Democratic President Harry Truman had developed the strategy of “containment” to weaken America’s adversaries by isolating them diplomatically and commercially. Kissinger determined that “containment” actually obstructed the US pursuit of its national interests by pressing foes to form a military, diplomatic and commercial “bloc” or coalition to counter United States military and economic power. Kissinger’s strategy of “engagement” aimed at breaking up the “bloc” by inducing selected “bloc” members to engage in diplomacy and trade with the United States. The strategy proved successful, first with the People’s Republic of China and eventually with many of the Soviet Union’s former allies.

Today, advocates of so-called “soft power” are actually promoting the earlier concept of “engagement.” “Engagement,” or “soft power,” rejects President Bush’s preference for unilateralism in favor of multilateralism, a return to the Republican initiated strategy that emphasized negotiation rather than confrontation, and inducing rather than coercing an adversary to comply with United States’ objectives. But President Obama does agree with President Bush that the United States must maintain a potent military deterrence capability.

President Obama favors pragmatism over his predecessor's practice of anchoring policies in ideology and religion. Unlike Bush, Obama invites adviser and respects international law and precedent. He avoids citing his religious beliefs to justify decisions and does not chastise his adversaries in personal and derogatory terms, something President Bush did often regarding North Korean leader Kim Jong Il.⁸

President Obama is therefore much less likely to deploy a "military option" or rely on coercive tactics such as economic sanctions. He may eventually do so, but only after first engaging in intense multilateral diplomacy and consultation with his allies. Obama is certain to dismiss the so-called "Bush Doctrine" of "pre-emptive" nuclear attack on an adversary deemed a threat to the United States, a strategy President Bush used to justify the invasion of Iraq and refusal to negotiate with North Korea.⁹

Dealing with North Korea

President Obama, Secretary Clinton and Special Representative for North Korea Policy Ambassador Stephen Bosworth have defined in their public remarks a strategy toward North Korea best summarized as one of using "carrots and sticks" to deal with North Korea. Diplomats commonly use this phrase to describe a strategy that emphasizes negotiation and the use of inducements and selective coercive tactics to win an adversaries cooperation.

Six Party Talks

Obama made clear his approach to North Korea in Prague on April 5 when he stated, "The United States is fully committed to maintaining security and stability in northeast Asia and we will continue working for the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through the Six Party Talks." This statement combines classic multilateral negotiations backed by resolute military deterrence.¹⁰

The president was echoing statements made earlier by Clinton during her February visit to East Asia and Bosworth when he visited the region in March and late April 2009. Clinton in Tokyo on February 19 told journalists,¹¹

"... the previous administration's policy changed, as you know, ... I think their ending policy – that we had to engage in the Six-Party Talks and even bilaterally with North Korea – is where they should have started ... we have to work closely with ... Japan and South Korea, and engage with China and Russia to bring influence to bear on North Korea ..."

She added that "the agenda for the Six-Party Talks is a comprehensive one, pursuing denuclearizing (sic) in a verifiable and complete way, dealing with their missiles, and the human rights agenda, which includes the [Japanese] abductees."

Carrots and Sticks

Also on April 5 in Prague President Obama displayed both “carrots and sticks.” First he stated,

North Korea has a pathway to acceptance in the international community, but it will not find that acceptance unless it abandons its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and abides by its international obligations and commitments.

Later the same day he deployed a stick when condemning North Korea’s launch of a long range ballistic missile. He called North Korea a “violator” of international law, a reference to its disregard for United Nations Security Council’s (UNSC) 2006 resolution 1718 that called on North Korea to halt its nuclear and ballistic missile tests, and urged the international community to issue a strong statement that chastised North Korea for its misconduct. He also sanctioned the US-European Council Joint Statement on the North Korean Launch.¹²

Secretary Clinton in her first diplomatic overture to North Korea on February 13 during a speech to the Asia Society in New York offered Pyongyang several inducements,¹³

If North Korea is genuinely prepared to completely and verifiably eliminate their nuclear weapons program, the Obama Administration will be willing to normalize bilateral relations, replace the peninsula’s long standing armistice agreements with a permanent peace treaty, and assist in meeting the energy and other economic needs for the North Korea people.

Shortly after assuming his role in the Obama Administration, Ambassador Bosworth echoed the president’s preference for negotiation and dialogue when on February 26 he told reporters in Washington just before traveling to East Asia, “... we plan to engage with North Korea. The question as to whether we’re going to engage with them on this particular trip remains to be decided. That will depend upon our consultations in the region, and it will depend upon what we hear back from the North Koreans.” His remarks combined an inducement with the willingness for bilateral dialogue by offering to travel to Pyongyang. President Bush during his first five years in office had disallowed both dialogue and visits to Pyongyang.¹⁴

In Tokyo on March 6, Bosworth said after discussions with his Japanese counterpart, “We agree that we would like to resume the Six-Party Talks as soon as possible.”

Shortly afterward, Bosworth confirmed Seoul’s preference to return to the Six Party Talks. Here Bosworth was displaying yet another Obama Administration tactics – close trilateral coordination between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul to present Pyongyang with a united front, something the Bush Administration had never been able to accomplish.¹⁵

During his second visit to East Asia, Bosworth further clarified the US position regarding bilateral dialogue with North Korea. He said on May 12, that the administration is willing and ready to engage in direct bilateral talks with North Korea, but only so long as the talks are “within the framework of the Six-Party process.”¹⁶

Obama Administration “Dream Team”

President Obama and Secretary Clinton have assembled an outstanding team of experienced diplomats and experts to deal with North Korea, something the Bush Administration had not done. The Obama team combines experience in dealing with North Korea and complementary expertise in nuclear non-proliferation and knowledge of East Asia. President Bush demonstrated little interests in listening to the advice of similarly qualified advisers.

Heading the North Korea team is Special Representative for North Korea Policy Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, an experienced career diplomat who served in several areas of the world but is particularly knowledgeable about North Korea because of his role as the first director of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). KEDO had been established in 1995 to implement major aspects of the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework that was designed to end North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons. Bosworth presents himself as a mild mannered diplomat but he is a tough negotiator, something the North Koreans learned in their earlier dealings with him.

Assisting Bosworth will be another career diplomat Ambassador Sung Kim. Born in South Korea, his family relocated to California when he was young. Ambassador Kim has served in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), China, South Korea as the Embassy's politico-military affairs officer and then in Washington as Office of Korea Affairs director where he worked intensely on the Six Party Talks.

At the National Security Council (NSC) to advise the president, secretary of state and Ambassador Bosworth are two experienced career government officials: Dr. Gary Samore, NSC adviser on nuclear weapons proliferation issues, and Jeffrey Bader, a retired career diplomat with expertise in China. Samore served on the US negotiating team that formulated the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework. At that same time, Bader was director of China and Mongolian Affairs at the State Department. Samore is similarly mild mannered, distrusts North Korea and favors sticks over carrots when negotiating with North Korea.

Daniel Poneman, now Deputy Secretary of the Department of Energy, is directly involved in nuclear weapons non-proliferation policy formulation and implementation. He also was a member of the US negotiating team that formulated the 1994 US-DRK Agreed Framework and brings to his position knowledge and experience about dealing with North Korea and nuclear weapons proliferation. During the Clinton Administration, Poneman was perceived as a "hard liner" because of his insistence that North Korea fully and transparently comply with international nuclear safeguards as defined by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Coordinating with them at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will be Frank Januzzi who served as a staff assistant to the president, vice president and secretary of state when they were members of the committee. Before moving to the committee in 1995, Januzzi was an analyst at the State Department's INR who concentrated on North Korea's ballistic missile program. He has also visited North Korea a number of times. An

advocate of engagement, Januzzi shares Samore's and Poneman's suspicions about North Korea's compliance with its public pledges.

Finally there is Kurt Campbell who was recently named the Department of State's new Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs to replace Ambassador Christopher Hill, former US chief delegate to the Six Party Talks and now ambassador to Iraq. Campbell's expertise lies primarily with the US-Japan alliance. He served in the US Navy on the staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and in the Chief of Naval Operations Special Intelligence Unit. During the Clinton Administration he held the office of deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asia and the Pacific in the Pentagon and served on the National Security Council (NSC). Campbell intensely distrusts North Korea and prefers coercive tactics when dealing with Pyongyang.

Conclusion

East Asia is President Obama's third area of concern in his foreign policy, but the high priority he has assigned to halting nuclear weapons proliferation elevates the importance of his policy toward North Korea. Obama will continue pursuing his predecessor's goal of ending North Korea's nuclear weapons program, and he will retain the Six Party Talks as the primary venue for dealing with North Korea. Another similarity with the Bush Administration is that President Obama will sustain strong military alliances with Japan and South Korea.

But here Obama parts company with Bush. Obama will pursue a strategy of "engagement" or "soft power" while relying on tactics best characterized as combining "carrots and sticks." His "carrots" will include a willingness to engage in bilateral dialogue, allow US diplomats to visit Pyongyang and North Koreans to enter Washington, DC, something President Bush virtually never allowed. Secretary Clinton has already offered to normalize relations with North Korea and to replace the Korean War Armistice with a peace treaty, but only if North Korea agrees to verifiably end its nuclear weapons program. Also unlike the Bush Administration, President Obama will avoid publicly belittling North Korea's leader.

Obama Administration tactics will accent multilateralism. Washington will coordinate much closer with Tokyo and Seoul regarding policy toward Pyongyang, a significant difference with the Bush Administration and a return to the trilateral coordination of the Clinton Administration. President Obama will attempt to rally broad international support in the hope of convincing North Korea that its interests are better served by compliance with international standards of conduct rather than pursuing its "rogue" preferences. Already the Obama Administration in April 2009 supported the UNSC censure of North Korea for its disregard of UNSC Resolution 1718. Ambassadors Bosworth and Kim have forged a consensus among Six Party Talks to apply diplomatic pressure on North Korea to return to the talks. Again unlike the Bush Administration, the Obama Administration has not referred to coercive measures such as use of a "military option," enforcement of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) or economic sanctions.

North Korea's response thus far is disappointing. Already a month before Clinton's offer to normalize diplomatic relations, North Korea's Foreign Ministry on January 17, 2009, dismissed any possibility of ending its nuclear program in exchange for normal diplomatic relations with the United States and economic assistance. Pyongyang declared, "The issue of normalizing the relations and the nuclear issue are the two separate matters ..." It concluded, "Though the bilateral relations are normalized in a diplomatic manner, the DPRK's status as a nuclear weapons state will remain unchanged as long as it is exposed even to the slightest U.S. nuclear threat."¹⁷

Pyongyang on March 18, 2009 expelled an American humanitarian consortium from North Korea and halted South Korean access to the joint South-North Kaesong Industrial Zone.¹⁸ Then on April 5, despite international objections, North Korea launched its third long range ballistic missile. When the UNSC approved a President's Statement that condemned North Korea's launch, Pyongyang declared that its pledges to the Six Party Talks are ineffective, ceased reversed its dismantlement of its nuclear program, expelled American and International Atomic Energy Agency technicians from its Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center and restarted its nuclear program.

Nevertheless, Secretary Clinton told the U.S. House Foreign Relations Committee in testimony on April 23, 2009, "I think we have to be strong, patient, persistent and not give in to the kind of back-and-forth, the unpredictable behavior of the North Korean regime."¹⁹

Obviously the Obama Administration is determined to be persistent in its pursuit of a multilateral "carrot and stick" strategy to end North Korea's nuclear program. The passage of time, however, benefits North Korea. The longer it has to refine its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, the greater the chances that it will successfully develop a nuclear armed ballistic missile capable of hitting first Japan and eventually the United States. Once it has this capability, the price of dismantling these programs will have soared to unprecedented heights.

End Notes

¹ Statement by the President on Afghanistan,” February 17, 2009, www.whitehouse.gov.

² www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/foreignpolicy/.

³ www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office, “Joint Statement by Dmitriy A Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, and Barack Obama, President of the United States of America, Regarding Negotiations on Further Reduction in Strategic Offensive Arms,” April 1, 2009.

⁴ www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office, “Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009.

⁵ Steven Mufson, “The Way Bush Sees the World,” *Washington Post* (February 17, 2002).

⁶ See, C. Kenneth Quinones, “Dualism in the Bush Administration’s North Korea Policy,” *Asian Perspective* (2003) Vol. 27, No. 1, 198.

⁷ www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office, “Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009.) “Joint Statement by Dmitriy A Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, and Barack Obama, President of the United States of America, Regarding Negotiations on Further Reduction in Strategic Offensive Arms,” April 1, 2009.

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⁹ Hakan Tunc, “Preemption in the Bush Doctrine: A Reappraisal,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* (January 2009) Vol. 5, I. pp. 1-16.

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