

Dealing with North Korea – Unilateralism or Multilateralism?

By

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The United States and the Republic of Korea share the same goals when it comes to dealing with North Korea but prefer divergent strategies to achieve these goals. Their alliance to sustain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula remains solid despite occasional irritations. Both seek a nuclear free Korean Peninsula. They aspire to achieve a peaceful diplomatic solution and agree this would best be achieved in conjunction with Korea's neighbors - China, Japan and Russia. Hence, both have enthusiastically followed China's lead in the pursuit of a peaceful diplomatic solution vis a vis the so-called Six Party Talks process.

But at this point, their perceptions of the Korean Peninsula's nuclear problem and fundamental strategy for achieving it diverge. The Bush administration since it completed its review of North Korea policy in June 2001 has preferred a unilateral, "all or nothing" approach which has accented three basic features:

- the United States will determine unilaterally the conditions for engaging North Korea in any negotiations;
- other nations will play a supporting role in resolving the nuclear problem in Northeast Asia, and
- North Korea must first unilaterally disarm itself of all weapons of mass destruction before it could expect any "rewards."

Reluctantly, the Bush Administration adjusted its unilateral position to accommodate other nations' preference for a multilateral approach. In part, it did so because of determined dissent within its own ranks. It also did so under pressure from its allies South Korea and Japan. The initial consequence was the "Three Party Talks" of April 2003. Subsequently China convened the "Six Party Talks" of June 2003.

But even within this multilateral context, the United States has insisted that its allies and friends, China and Russia, follow its game plan as outlined above. President Bush continues to claim that China has considerable leverage over North Korea so he will "let China take care of North Korea." Meanwhile, Washington persists in its refusal to "reward North Korea's nuclear black mail" with bilateral diplomatic negotiations and the exchange of concessions.

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.

Seoul's Preferences

South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun on his way to Washington, D.C. for his first summit with President Bush outlined an agenda to journalists that highlighted some differences in their preferred approaches to dealing with North Korea. Roh on May 12, 2003 told the *Washington Times* that he wanted "... to discuss with President Bush that the circumstances on the Korean Peninsula may not be appropriate ..." to apply his principle of pre-emptive counter proliferation. The Bush Administration had announced this strategy in December 2002 and promptly cited it when a shipment of North Korean ballistic missiles en route to Yemen was seized on the high seas.

Then on May 13, Roh told the *Wall Street Journal*, "I think coercive measures have to wait until we have exhausted all possible efforts at dialogue with North Korea." Roh added, "If the U.S. makes up its mind to resolve this issue through diplomacy, it can do so." This, he concluded, "might require concessions." Roh made these comments after the April 2003 "three party talks" and before the six party talks commenced in June 2003, but they remain pillars of Seoul's preferred strategy for dealing with North Korea as reflected in its "economic cooperation" policy toward Pyongyang.

But at the 2003 summit, the two presidents agreed to gloss over their differences so as to deny Pyongyang any opportunity to exploit their divergent preferences. In their joint statement, they accented the positive. Regarding North Korea's nuclear ambitions, the two leaders agreed that they want "the complete verifiable and irreversible elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons program through peaceful means based on international cooperation." President Bush's one possible concession to Roh may have been the joint statement's reference to the possibility of Russia and other nations playing a "constructive role in multilateral diplomacy." Until this point, the Bush Administration, like the Clinton Administration before it, was leery of including Russia in any strategy to end North Korea's nuclear program.

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.¹ Notably, progress on opening up Libya's and Iran's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs was preceded by diplomatic negotiations with major European powers and the promise of acceptance back into the international community. For Libya, where the most significant accomplishments have been made, this latter inducement implied substantial economic and security gains in the form of normalized commercial and diplomatic

¹ See, for example, Edward A. Olsen, "A Korean Solution to the United States' Korean Problem," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vo. 17, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2003).

relations. These are far more effective tools 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. The current approach may also prevent plans for reducing U.S. forces in South Korea, requiring instead a costly buildup.

The Bush administration would therefore do well to reconsider its strategy—before it is too late and multiple North Korean 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, continues to reprocess 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, raising the likelihood of North Korean compliance with the international community's preference for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.

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.