

A new strategy toward North Korea: proactive, comprehensive, and productive by RADM L.R. “Joe” Vasey (USN, Ret.)

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The US has been contending with the challenge of the North Korean nuclear program for decades, yet we are no closer to the goal of convincing the North to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Indeed, that goal now appears unattainable under current circumstances.

Meanwhile the most serious threat facing the world today is the danger of nuclear proliferation. Both North Korea and Iran continue to develop nuclear weapons production capabilities. If they succeed, their regional neighbors will go nuclear in response, triggering a global cascade of proliferation. The resulting worldwide availability of nuclear weapons and fissile material to rogue states and terrorist groups will rapidly lead to a chaotic situation out of control.

The end goal of this strategy is a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, a North Korean economy that can sustain itself, a regional security environment free of military threats from North Korea, and decisive actions addressing the deplorable human rights situation throughout North Korea.

This is an extremely ambitious and complex undertaking and requires US statesmanship, creativity, and leadership of the caliber which launched the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine to re-build war-torn regions and economies after World War II, and led the way in creating NATO to cope with the threat of aggressive Communist expansion sponsored by the Soviet Union.

The strategy

US presidential involvement at the outset is essential to personally inform the prime minister of Japan and the new president of South Korea that a new strategic approach to resolving the North Korean nuclear challenge is evolving and he is sending a special Presidential Envoy to work with both governments to flesh out the strategy and insure their national interests and concerns are incorporated in the final action. The Special Envoy will report directly to the US Secretary of State and will be headquartered in the US Embassy in Seoul for the next three months. Both allies are requested to appoint Special Envoys to work jointly with the US Presidential Envoy in rounding out and preparing for eventual implementation of an agreed upon strategy.

The center-piece of the strategy is a Mini-Marshall Plan prepared and executed in coordination with US allied partners Japan and South Korea, to assist North Korea in developing a

self-sustaining economy. This will include help in modernization of the power grid in North Korea, expansion of the mining and minerals industry leading to major sources of income from mineral exports, and revitalization of the agricultural sector, with the goal of becoming self-sufficient in food production.

North Korea has sizeable deposits of more than 200 different minerals, including coal, iron ore, magnesite, gold ore, zinc ore, copper ore, limestone, molybdenite, graphite and tungsten. All have the potential for the development of large-scale mines. North Korea's magnesite reserves are the second largest in the world, after China, and its tungsten deposits are likely the sixth-largest in the world.

Yet North Korean mining production has decreased significantly since the early 1990s. It is likely that the average operational rate of existing mine facilities is below 30 per cent of capacity. There is a shortage of mining equipment and North Korea is unable to purchase new equipment due to its dire economic situation, the energy shortage and the age and generally poor condition of the power grid.

Studies by South Korean research institutes have demonstrated that agriculture itself can lead to a revival of the economy if appropriate policy changes were implemented by the government and changes made in the infrastructure that support agriculture. Meanwhile, with access to food in North Korea controlled by government policies and dependent upon perceived political reliability, over half of the population are without sufficient food to remain healthy. Over a third of the young children suffer from chronic malnutrition. Since the end of the Cold War, North Korea has been primarily dependent on assistance from China and South Korea.

China's role in the strategy

Conventional wisdom of most China analysts would be that China's leadership is unlikely to support such a strategy toward North Korea due to its own substantial investment in the country, aid packages and resource trade; and most importantly its own strategic objectives to preserve the North and eventually leverage the US out of the Korean peninsula. But successful implementation of the strategy would likely change regional security dynamics in Northeast Asia in ways favorable to China and all regional nations, and the US as well.

As mentioned previously the project will initially be launched by the coalition of three allied nations – US, Japan, ROK – working in close coordination under US leadership. China will be kept informed of progress periodically, After the coalition of three are in complete agreement with all aspects of the Strategy including its implementation, China will be given an open ended invitation to join the Coalition.

Concurrent nuclear proliferation and strategic dialogue with China's top leadership

US Presidential involvement will again be required to inform China's President of the US desire for a series of bilateral dialogues and briefings with China's top leadership, initially focused on the evolving dangers of global nuclear proliferation, followed by discussions of various strategic scenarios for the future of Northeast Asia and the likely implications for regional stability and economic progress in the short and long terms.

The US leader of this endeavor should be a highly respected American statesman with real world experience and high level responsibilities in all aspects of the command, control, accountability, storage and use of nuclear weapons; he or she should also be knowledgeable of the dangers associated with the proliferation of nuclear weapons, fissile materials and technologies. Former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates would be an ideal choice.

A security guarantee for North Korea

Once North Korea unequivocally agrees to cooperate in the implementation of the economic development Strategy, the Coalition will issue a guarantee of North Korea's security from unprovoked aggression across its borders.

Presentation of the coalition's economic development strategy to North Korea's top leadership in Pyongyang.

The special envoys of the Coalition countries will meet in Pyongyang with North Korea's top political and leadership to inform them of the generous proposal of the Coalition governments to commit to a four year economic assistance program to help modernize the North Korean economy with first priority to developing an agriculture sector that can be self-sustaining and provide the required food for its people. North Korea will be expected to initiate immediate verifiable steps to abandon its nuclear and long range missile programs, and initiate immediate actions to curb the human rights abuses of the government – all of the foregoing are non-negotiable. North Korea will also be expected to cooperate in reducing North-South military tensions.

Provocative military actions by North Korea will not be tolerated and will be dealt with firmly and decisively.

The North Korean leadership will be given ten days to respond affirmatively. If negative or there is foot dragging, the Coalition will initiate an intensive campaign to inform North Korean citizens of the generous offer of the Coalition countries and the negative response of their own government leadership. (Given Pyongyang's paranoia about opening up and its desire to control information, this is a vulnerability that needs to be exploited for the benefit of the North Korean people.)

The successful implementation of this strategy will significantly reduce tensions in the regional security environment and benefit all nations concerned.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.