



North Korea: New Approach Needed

by Ralph A. Cossa

It's time for Washington and Seoul to try a new approach with North Korea. It's time to do ... absolutely nothing!

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell has announced that the U.S. is prepared to resume negotiations with North Korea anywhere, any time, at North Korea's choosing, with no preconditions. Pyongyang has said it finds these terms unacceptable. Instead, the North has demanded that President Bush must return to a policy "identical" to his predecessor before it is willing to allow talks to continue. This demand seems to be based on the ridiculous premise that Washington is so eager to resume discussions with Pyongyang that it is willing to permit the North to dictate the terms.

There are some (both on and beyond the Korean Peninsula) who believe that Washington does not want to engage Pyongyang, that the U.S. needs North Korea as an enemy in order to justify its military presence in Asia and its missile defense program. I firmly reject this argument. But the reverse is also false. The Bush administration certainly does not need - even though it has made it clear that it prefers - good relations with Pyongyang. The benefits of improved U.S.-DPRK relations will be accrued primarily by the North, which remains relatively isolated from the international community and will likely become more so if it does not move forward with U.S.-DPRK and especially North-South dialogue.

There are others who blame Washington's "hardline demands" for the breakdown in U.S.-DPRK talks. But while Washington has made it clear it prefers a more comprehensive dialogue that includes discussion of conventional as well as nuclear and missile threats, Secretary Powell's repeated "no preconditions" pledge confirms that these are proposed discussion topics, not a hard and fast "unilaterally-imposed" agenda.

Meanwhile, Seoul has been even more forthcoming than Washington, providing numerous incentives to the North while similarly setting no preconditions for a resumption of dialogue. Seoul has done everything short of going in and personally restoring the rail line from Pyongyang south through the DMZ - something the Russians have offered to do, with South Korean financing of course - in order to facilitate Kim Jong-il's promised visit to the South. In a further show of good faith (if not blind faith), the ROK has already opened up the rail and road link through their portion of the DMZ, even though the North has yet to begin to honor its part of this agreement either.

Despite a considerable amount of good faith (and continued political courage) on the part of ROK President Kim Dae-jung, the most anyone has received from the North is the assurance that

Kim Jong-il will honor his pledge to travel South "when conditions are right." Just what's wrong with current conditions is usually left unsaid, but the implication is that it is somehow Washington's fault.

In response to North Korea's continued recalcitrance, President Kim has inexplicably been calling repeatedly on the United States to "make its best effort to resume talks" with the North. I say "inexplicably" because it is Pyongyang and not Washington that is setting the preconditions and that has been stonewalling the South as well. Imagine if President Bush started urging President Kim to try harder to engage the North - Kim would (rightfully) be insulted.

But, as long as President Kim appears to be blaming Washington for the lack of progress in U.S.-DPRK relations and seems unprepared to tell the North that "enough is enough" - that this is about as "right" as conditions are ever going to get - it appears likely that all Pyongyang is going to do is more of the same: nothing. It's time for Seoul and Washington to adopt this strategy and do nothing in return, other than to jointly and firmly tell Pyongyang that the ball is still in its court. And, if Beijing is serious about wanting to play a constructive role on the Peninsula, Chinese President Jiang Zemin should likewise encourage Kim Jong-il to set a date for his promised visit to Seoul and to accept Washington and Seoul's "no preconditions" offers to direct dialogue during his visit this coming week to the DPRK ... and Kim Dae-jung should encourage Jiang to "make his best effort" to move Kim Jong-il in this direction.

Perhaps if Seoul appeared a little less eager, Pyongyang would be a bit more responsive. While Washington appears willing to wait for the North to finally come around, President Kim seems more and more desperate to have the dialogue resume, since the political clock is ticking on the Peninsula and his legacy appears increasingly at stake. But President Kim's political insight and courage in making the first steps toward Pyongyang cannot be denied or reversed; his legacy is already secure. The rest is up to Pyongyang. If Kim Jong-il lacks the political wisdom or courage to respond appropriately to Seoul's (and Washington's) overtures, the fault lies only with the North.

Meanwhile, to those who are convinced that this is all part of some American plot to retain a needed enemy in Asia, the antidote for Pyongyang is a simple one - all it has to do is challenge the U.S. to take "yes" for an answer by agreeing to dialogue without preconditions. Or it can ignore the U.S. completely and just press forward with its own dialogue with the South, thus demonstrating to the international community that it is capable of living up to its own freely made commitments.

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