



“Facts Please” by James Kelly and Victor Cha

The following was written in response to Leon Sigal's letter to the editor in the January/February 2008 issue of Foreign Affairs.

There has been a remarkably consistent U.S. policy toward North Korea. “Peaceful resolution” through diplomatic means was President George W. Bush’s constant core policy to resolve North Korea’s decades long nuclear weapons effort. This policy was spelled out to allies and to North Korea. Granted, significant voices in the administration – persons who are still very vocal – made remarks that suggested that nothing less than regime change would suffice. But they were and are without support from the president nor have they any realistic alternative strategy. Then and now, these voices represented Washington expressions of indignation rather than policy.

When President Bush came to office in January 2001, there was a comprehensive – often contentious – review of policy toward North Korea. At the June 2001 conclusion of this review, President Bush directed his team “to undertake serious discussions with North Korea on a broad agenda...” It affirmed the 1994 Agreed Framework and, as Secretary of State Colin L. Powell repeatedly stated, the administration was prepared to meet the North Koreans “anytime, and any place,” with an open agenda.

It was not until almost a year later that North Korea evinced any interest in a dialogue with the United States. And by then new information had emerged within the U.S. government about significant uranium enrichment efforts in violation of several agreements, including the Agreed Framework. In October 2002 Assistant Secretary of State Jim Kelly traveled to Pyongyang to explain these concerns to the DPRK, but he did so in the context of a larger proposal – a bold approach – that explained how complete and verifiable denuclearization could bring Pyongyang an entirely new relationship with the U.S. The North responded with anger to this proposal, and the U.S. stopped fuel shipments in December 2002, which was followed by Pyongyang’s expulsion of international inspectors from the Yongbyon nuclear facility and the unraveling of the 1994 agreement.

Some argue the administration should have taken an alternative course in 2002 focused on containing the plutonium that had been held at Yongbyon for eight years, ahead of or in parallel with confronting North Korea about its newer and secretive pursuit of alternative means of obtaining fissionable material by enriching uranium. In principle, this might have been logical, but continuing U.S.-funded fuel purchases and deliveries, never popular in the Congress, in the face of serious violations of the core agreement would have been politically impossible even if the administration had

sought to do so. Congress’ required annual certifications of North Korean compliance would have been crucial in ensuring this result.

It is claimed that Bush was not committed to a multilateral diplomatic approach in the first term, but this obscures the fact that he sanctioned multilateral talks, began as Three Party Talks (U.S.-China-DPRK) in March 2003 and emerged as the Six-Party Talks in August 2003. The purpose was to come up with workable proposals to put the DPRK nuclear issue back on a diplomatic track. In June 2004, a proposal by the U.S., coordinated with Japan and South Korea, was put forward at the Six-Party Talks, which sought to begin serious bargaining. The U.S. proposal basically outlined energy and economic assistance for the DPRK in return for denuclearization. The DPRK, rather than respond, chose to avoid all talks, complain about a U.S. “hostile policy,” and delay for more than a year.

It is also alleged that former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro was vainly “trying again and again to coax President Bush into negotiating in earnest with North Korea.” This is simply untrue; the two leaders agreed that a combination of “dialogue and pressure” was the principle for dealing with the DPRK.

After Bush’s re-election, in order to allay any speculation that the June 2004 proposal might no longer be valid, the administration inserted words reiterating the commitment to peaceful diplomacy through the Six-Party Talks into the 2005 inaugural speech, the State of the Union address, and in Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s confirmation hearings. In the spring of 2005, Joseph DeTrani and Victor Cha met with the North Koreans in New York to reiterate this commitment. While the DPRK officials had questions about one statement by then-Secretary-designate Rice, grouping the country with other “outposts of tyranny,” they recognized the administration’s diplomatic efforts.

Did Bush’s strategy change in the second term? Yes, but this shift was tactical, not strategic. For example, the U.S. had held U.S.-DPRK bilateral talks on the sidelines of the three previous six-party meetings. In Bush’s second term, this was expanded to allow U.S. envoy Christopher Hill to propose such talks as needed on a case-by-case basis in locales outside of Beijing during six-party intersessions – a practice that was recommended by China as hosts of the talks. The contents of any bilateral discussions would then be brought back to the Chinese, who would then formulate a draft six-party agreement. This was the process for reaching the February 2007 and October 2007 implementation agreements.

For any astute observer, the question then becomes: if the United States was doing diplomacy all along, then why did the DPRK not respond until the September 2005 Joint Statement – a principles document that was not substantially different in

concept from the June 2004 proposal? And after that, why did it not agree to implement the document until February 2007?

The answer is not that the U.S. merely had to become more solicitous of the DPRK. Instead, systematic diplomacy, in conjunction with international sanctions and pressure that the Pyongyang regime brought upon itself through its own actions, forced the DPRK into negotiating seriously. The pressure was not Bush neocons shouting “axis of evil” or calling for “regime change,” but U.N. Chapter 7 sanctions and other financial sanctions brought upon the regime for its illicit business practices, and extremely provocative ballistic missile tests of July 2006, and nuclear test of October 2006. Anyone and everyone who has negotiated with the DPRK knows that a carrots-only approach is sure to be exploited by the regime. Only the careful management of incentives and disincentives among the five parties will get us to the goal of denuclearization.

Currently, the administration stands atop a diplomatic process that has gone further in disabling the North’s nuclear program than any previous administration. The policy has bipartisan support, and is widely endorsed in the region by the six-party partners who all acknowledge behind closed doors that we gotten this far only because of U.S. leadership and diplomatic initiative, not because of any DPRK flexibility. Each of the North’s delays offends shrill Washington voices, but given the absence of alternatives, there is no other way. The U.S. will never accept a nuclear North Korea, and only persistence will bring eventual denuclearization – perhaps accompanied by other improvements – and probably influenced by some internal shift within the DPRK.

It is dangerous to perpetuate the myth that the North Koreans are jilted suitors so desirous of a deal with the United States that if we just sat down with them, they would readily give up their programs. North Korea has worked and invested since the 1960s to obtain nuclear weapons. Any responsible negotiator must expect that Pyongyang wants to have its cake and eat it – it wants the benefits of economic and energy assistance, while retaining as much of its nuclear weapons capabilities as possible. The current stalemate shows clearly that the North is not yet ready to reveal the full extent of its nuclear activities as called for in the latest six-party agreement. That’s a fact that cannot be ignored.

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