



Firmness and Realism Needed on North Korea

by James A. Kelly

As President Clinton visits Seoul, it is high time to review creaking American policies toward the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea. A "soft landing" is a wish, not a policy. Equally, the administration's pride, the four year old "Agreed Framework" despite worthy success in freezing a part of North Korea's nuclear weapons efforts, is also much less than a complete policy and may have failed on some of its own terms. Finally, the "Four Party Talks" have accomplished nothing other than to be an indirect vehicle for providing new levels of food aid in return for North Korean attendance.

The Congress cannot manage foreign policy but it has been right to raise the serious objections that it has. In particular, its demand for a special coordinator has been fulfilled by the appointment of respected former Secretary of Defense William Perry. This provides an opportunity to fully consider all options in a situation where few may look very good.

First, we need to recognize that North Korea is a failed state of questionable legitimacy. Most current evidence proclaims that the state exists to preserve the lives and power of Kim Jong Il and the rest of its ruling cadres, primarily the army. Despite a much improved grain situation this year, North Korea is far short of being able to feed itself. It will not ever be able to do so under present policies. Thousands, perhaps millions, have died of starvation and medical neglect and many more will succumb.

Second, we need to question the administration's assumption that "time is on our side." This might be so if it provided time for North Korea to adjust to the world and begin economic reforms. But despite bluster, there is precious little concrete evidence of any serious moves toward reform. There is talk of projects starting, but in the end nothing much happens.

We must recognize the huge risk that North Korea holds over all of our heads. There is plentiful evidence of this including the August 31 launch of a failed satellite from a new, long range, three stage ballistic missile, and possibly from the reported huge new underground facility. The regime is using its external support to buy time to develop weapons of mass destruction and employ them in a strategy of threats.

North Korea faces a dilemma: it cannot survive materially without economic reform. But the threat to the regime from exposure of the people to the outside if it begins any serious reform is too great. In our desire for a "soft landing" we are simply enabling new crimes against the North Korean people, and more immediately, new and serious threats to ourselves.

Meanwhile, South Korea faces huge internal tasks of restoring growth while weaning itself from economic myths of

endless capacity funded by borrowed money. At the same time, President Kim Dae Jung's government must fight tendencies to wish North Korea away and face the sad reality across the demilitarized zone. South Korea someday, probably sooner rather than later, will have the main responsibility of managing unification, not to mention whatever shocks that might precede it.

But this is not to advocate harsh military pressure on North Korea. Our allies believe they would be risking too much, and they may be right. At any event, the larger dangers would be theirs, and we have to respect that while working to ensure clear-eyed vision about North Korea. Washington's responses always have to be carefully orchestrated with Seoul.

For policy, continued engagement is acceptable, but there has to be a realistic firmness in responding to demands for cash, especially because that is the source of creature comforts for the leadership. Our responses should include the following:

- Aim to shift the primary focus from U.S.-D.P.R.K. to North-South contacts. The unobserved but valid agreements of 1991/1992 between the Koreans can be the basis for moving ahead. If any North Korean economic reforms are going to develop, they will be through the efforts of South Korean businesses. So far, there is much more talk than action, but the efforts should continue.

- The "Agreed Framework's" successes, including the joint KEDO organization, justify its continuation but the plans now being worked -- to build large light water reactors in North Korea -- are unrealistic. The reactors are very costly, and will not be usable even in the unlikely event they are completed. North Korea has no power grid to handle the electricity and no means to build one. In place, and in support of a beginning of reforms, KEDO's plans should be adjusted to provide smaller scale thermal power generation plants.

- China has received more praise for its help than it deserves. Still, China's short term interests do coincide with those of South Korea, Japan and the United States. China should be asked to coordinate its food aid with the UN Food Program, and to at least provide limited financial support to KEDO.

- Finally, North Korea must understand that using its meager resources for ballistic missiles or any weapons of mass destruction will be responded to by immediate reductions in aid and support. Benign neglect may be better here than direct pressure, but there does have to be a reaction to a provocation.

None of the above are magic solutions, and a case can be made that North Korea's ruling cadres should have no assistance in maintaining their inhumane control. But the removal of these last totalitarians is not in our power without risk of huge losses of life by innocent people. Continued

engagement, with firmness behind it, is what should be pursued.

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