



## **North Korea Policy – If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It...**

by Hazel Smith

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The current progress toward possible resolution of the long-lasting nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula is the result of the quite unlikely, somewhat unexpected, and very definitely unsung American foreign policy success that is the Bush administration's present strategy on North Korea. After more than five decades of security crises, this bold new approach is unraveling tension and (hopefully) building peace in one of the world's most volatile hot spots.

So while both Barack Obama and John McCain are running for president as "change" candidates eager to leave the "Dubya" years behind – particularly when it comes to salvaging America's position as global foreign policy leader – they would be well advised not to toss out the promising baby of present North Korea policy with the Bush administration bathwater.

Why is the new administration policy of engagement so unlikely? Quite simply because President Bush made no secret of the fact that he 'loathes' Kim Jong Il, North Korea's autocratic leader. North Korea was after all one of the three 'axis of evil' countries, along with Iran and Iraq.

It's also rather unexpected, because Assistant Secretary of State Chris Hill's decision to dump the previous policy of non-diplomacy that had achieved zero results for American security and to deal with the North Korean government as a party that could indeed be negotiated with – irrespective of the deep differences in values and interests – flew in the face of the dominant received 'wisdom' of the insular beltway circles that comprise official Washington.

Also dumped was an out-of-date picture of North Korea that no longer represents – if it ever did – the reality of North Korean society and economy. The view still presented by those who ought to know better is that North Korea is socially and economically static, with a brainwashed population incapable of rational thinking. Maybe North Korea came close to this sometime in the 1950s and '60s, when the socialization process lauding the Kim family was most intense, and the

government could afford to reward loyalty and insulate most North Koreans from the non-communist world.

Today, North Korea is a different country – still poor and politically repressed, but with a people that no longer rely on the state, since the state has not been able to feed them or provide a living wage for two decades. During and after the famine of the mid 1990s that killed up to a million people, North Koreans increasingly engaged in private market transactions for survival purposes. Today, the myriad official and unofficial opportunities for private market transactions provide their primary, and usually only, way of obtaining food and goods.

The majority of North Korea's 23 million people have thus long given up on the government as an economic provider and equally abandoned any idea that there is much worth preserving in the political system. As a result, the North Korean state is now far more motivated to seek an international security and economic deal in order to help restore its legitimacy in the eyes of its own people

Thanks to an endemic poverty of analysis, the conventional wisdom in Washington failed to comprehend the scope of this socio-economic transformation, which is both the cause and the consequence of the wholesale, irreversible and embedded "marketization without (political) liberalization" of today's North Korea.

Also forgotten until revived by Ambassador Hill and his team is the basic function of diplomacy, the very essence of which is to negotiate agreements with adversaries whose interests and values you do not share. The crazy policy that saw war as the only instrument of statecraft and all diplomacy as "appeasement" shows an appalling ignorance of history and realpolitik.

This perspective became dominant, however, because it was shared by a rather unholy alliance founded on a neo-conservative agenda (regime change by any means, because of human rights abuses) as well as that of millennial liberalism (human rights abuses, therefore regime change by any means). Both see dealing with North Korea as akin to supping with the devil.

Thus the emergence of Hill's new approach is truly an unsung success story, because there are still many on President Bush's side of the aisle who are privately – and publicly in the case of stalwarts like John Bolton – horrified at the thought of the United States doing any deal whatsoever with a regime they consider to be the reincarnation of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia combined.

As a result, Secretary of State Rice must strive in this election year to maintain Republican unity by downplaying the significance of how far negotiations have come. Neither is it in

the interests of the Democrats to laud a Republican administration's success in any arena.

With a new president looking to distinguish himself from the previous administration, the temptation may be to shift toward a 'new' way of dealing with the issue. But a return to the failed policies of the past would mean more stalemate, more tension, North Korea probably producing more nuclear bombs, the North Korean people continuing to be denied the external investment they need for recovery and growth, and the continuing closure of the country to human rights dialogue.

Some might find it uncomfortable to celebrate a Bush administration foreign policy success. If so, how about thinking about what is happening on the Korea front as a victory for *American* diplomacy?

So far it is Senator Obama who seems to have the least problems operating a bipartisan foreign policy – his work with Senator Lugar on controlling arms proliferation sets a useful precedent. Ironically, it is Senator McCain who may likely want to repudiate the Bush administration's success in foreign policy. He may calculate that "talking tough with dictators" might give him the campaign edge – no matter how much this has proved a failed policy in Korea for over half a century.

Not all change is good, and change for the sake of change is an empty policy. The message for Senators McCain and Obama? When it comes to North Korea policy – if it ain't broke, don't fix it!