



Bush's North Korea Policy: Still A Shambles by Aidan Foster-Carter

These are busy times for U.S. diplomacy on Korea. As usual, the focus is on North Korea, but the trips are to the South. (I use the words diplomacy and focus loosely here, as will be seen.)

On Nov. 16 Donald Rumsfeld visited Seoul for the first time as defense secretary, as part of what AFP headlined as a "sensitive Asian mission." (Does Rumsfeld do sensitive?) Besides the nuclear knot, he is tackling two other tricky issues. U.S. plans to pull back forces from their long-established tripwire position along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and maybe cut their strength from the current 37,000, have rattled an ally grown increasingly ambivalent about its relations with the U.S., and uneasy at the Bush administration's stance on the North.

More immediately, Rumsfeld will have a hard job pressing Asian allies to join the U.S. in its Iraqi quagmire. With Japan – also on his itinerary – declining to send any forces, the ROK's vacillating president Roh Moo-hyun, faced with strong domestic opposition, may follow suit. At best, according to his spokesman, he will commit just 3,000 troops to join 700 medics and engineers already in Mosul, rather than the 10,000 which the U.S. had reportedly hoped for.

Following hot on Rumsfeld's heels is James Kelly, who as assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs is the top U.S. policy-maker on the region. Kelly is due in Seoul on Nov. 19, after visits to Tokyo and Beijing. His focus is the six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear issue, of which a second round may be held in Beijing in mid-December.

President Bush himself, heading for the UK rather than Asia, seems a convert to a diplomatic solution: "Not every situation needs to be resolved through military action. And I would cite to you North Korea and Iran," he told British newspapers. This new, softer note on the two remaining "axis of evil" regimes was first heard on his whistlestop tour of six Asian nations – not including South Korea – last month. But not consistently: en route to Australia, Bush said he had no respect for Kim Jong-il as a leader who "starves and shrinks his own people."

At a sensitive and delicate time for diplomacy, trying to coax North Korea back to the table, one expects John Bolton to weigh in. Sure enough, another AFP headline on Nov. 13 read: "Bush administration hawk fires new volley at North Korea." Although on this occasion the under-secretary for arms control and international security eschewed personal attacks on Kim Jong-il, he warned that "blackmail and bad behavior ... will not be rewarded," and that "North Korea will not be given inducements" to mend its violation of past commitments.

Actions speak louder still. This seems an odd moment not just to insist that no new incentives are on offer, but also to take away what North Korea had been given before. On Nov. 5 the executive board – the U.S., Japan, South Korea, and the European Union – of KEDO (the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization) suspended the consortium's light water reactor (LWR) project at Kumho, in limbo anyway for the past year. Pyongyang, predictably, riposted with threats to seize KEDO's assets at the Kumho site, and demanded compensation.

Suspension is one thing, termination another. On Nov. 13 the U.S. ambassador in Seoul, Thomas C. Hubbard, said the U.S. has no plans to revive the LWR project – even if the DPRK comes into nuclear compliance. Much as Kim Jong-il violated at least the spirit of the 1994 Agreed Framework (AF) with his second secret nuclear program based on highly enriched uranium (HEU), this closure will hardly encourage him to trust future U.S. promises, if any.

Hubbard too may have regrets that he cannot voice. As deputy assistant secretary of state in the Clinton administration, he was influential in setting up KEDO. By chance, his former boss is yet another recent high-level American visitor to Seoul. Bill Clinton met both Roh Moo-hyun and his predecessor, Kim Dae-jung: doubtless amid nostalgia for the good old days, when the U.S. and ROK saw eye to eye and engagement seemed to be working.

Clinton is a reminder that there is nothing wrong with a U.S. president changing his mind, not least over as tough a nut as North Korea. As is now well known, early on his watch a second Korean war came uncomfortably close in May-June 1994 over the first North Korean crisis, until Jimmy Carter as *deus ex machina* flew to Pyongyang and saved the day. Thereafter the Clinton administration consistently pursued engagement with the DPRK, as seen in the AF, KEDO, high-level visits in both directions, and a missile near-deal aborted when time ran out.

One can, and Republicans vocally did, criticize all this as appeasement. The HEU and other revelations, not least that the June 2000 inter-Korean summit was in effect bought by Seoul, undoubtedly leave a sour taste and damage the case for Sunshine: suggesting as they do a recidivist and cynical DPRK, which has merely been stringing its interlocutors along.

Thus one would expect a new administration, of a different political stripe, to review policy on Korea as on other matters. Given recent history, a case can be made that Kim Jong-il is beyond redemption, so regime change is the only way forward. In my view that is a wrong conclusion and a perilous path. But had Bush pursued it consistently, one would understand. That would have entailed, if not military action (God forbid), then a better-planned version of the latter-day

Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI): which as it stands is mere gesture politics – send a gunboat, in 2003? – adding yet another conflicting ingredient to the chaotic policy mix.

What is only too clear, unconscionable and alarming is that fully three years after George W. Bush's election, and less than a year before he comes up for re-election, the U.S. still does not have any discernible unified joined-up policy on North Korea whatever. The mixed messages outlined above are merely the latest in a long line, baffling and bemusing friend and foe alike.

This is an extraordinary dereliction of duty by the world's sole superpower over what remains one of the planet's most dangerous crises. Regardless of ideology, and granted that there are no good options, it is hard to imagine how North Korea could have been handled worse than the Bush administration has done. Under Bush, the U.S. has failed either to formulate a North Korea policy, or to speak with one voice (an astonishing indiscipline) – or even, arguably, to really focus on Korea at all, obsessed and preoccupied as it is by west rather than east Asia.

The proof of the pudding is before us. A year ago, North Korea's nuclear ambitions were at least partially curbed. Now, Kim Jong-il is free to pursue both the plutonium and HEU routes to the bomb. None of the DPRK's multiple other concerns – missiles, chemical and biological weapons, state crime, and more – has even begun to be addressed. Frankly, the situation is completely out of control.

As for the six-party talks: much as North Korea is indeed a threat to one and all, its insistence ultimately on dealing with the U.S. (as in 1994) must cast doubt on how much a multilateral framework, and a cumbersome one at that, can accomplish. The curious lowering of the bar – should we cheer simply if the DPRK deigns to turn up a second time to a table it already sat around once, as if this were progress? – shows how remote any substantive solutions remain.

Even if all the current shuttling delivers a second six-way meeting in December, it is surely illusory to imagine it will produce any more progress than the first one in August. Kim Jong-il may well reckon – and would he be wrong? – that Bush's new-found penchant for dialogue is no genuine change of heart or mind, but driven by the Iraq disaster and electoral calculation.

Knowing that both factors will restrain even Bolton and his ilk, why would North Korea make any concessions at this time? A year hence, it will face either a Democrat president who will return to Clintonesque engagement, or a second-term Bush who – for all we know – may well revert to a harder line. Either way, the dear leader will surely keep his powder dry for now.

No one said handling North Korea was easy, but it should not have been such a mess as this. (The U.S. is not solely to blame: South Korean self-deception has not helped either, but that is another article.) The basic choices were, and are, quite simple: either you seek regime change, or you deal. (Squeezing can be part of either; one of PSI's problems, unlike China's carefully calibrated temporary holdback of oil, is that it is unclear if this is meant to nudge or strangle.) And going the deal route means concessions by both sides, even if that sticks in hawk craws.

At the early apogee of "axis of evil" rhetoric, George W. Bush seemed keen to emulate Bruce Lee, vanquishing a dozen villains simultaneously. Belatedly, bloodied by Iraq, he is learning the wisdom of Sun Tzu. Coldly: with al-Qaida a permanent mortal enemy, now joined by Baathist remnants in Iraq to make the whole Middle East a tinderbox, why on earth would one not secure the Korean flank by buying off the nasty but secular and sui generis DPRK?

But for now, three years in, we finally know what the Bush administration's North Korea policy is. It is a shambles, and a disgrace. We can only pray it will not be another disaster.

Aidan Foster-Carter is honorary senior research fellow in sociology and modern Korea at Leeds University England. Mr. Foster covers inter-Korean relations for Pacific Forum CSIS's online journal, Comparative Connections at [http://www.csis.org/pacfor/ccejournal.html]. He can be reached at afostercarter@aol.com