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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

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North Korea: Negotiations Work

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In a laudable about-face, President Bush has decided at last to accept North Korea's longstanding offer to suspend production of plutonium by shutting down and sealing its reactor and reprocessing plant at Yongbyon, halting construction of a larger reactor and not restarting a newly refurbished fuel fabrication plant. In so doing, he is rejecting the counsel of American hardliners who have kept the United States from making and living up to earlier agreements while managing to convince much of America that it is North Korea that has been the one at fault. By negotiating in earnest, Bush has achieved an important goal for U.S. and Asian security.

To do so the president had to take his first steps toward ending enmity with Pyongyang—authorize negotiator Christopher Hill to meet directly with his North Korean counterpart in Beijing and Berlin, free up suspect North Korean hard currency accounts in a Macao bank, resume shipments of heavy fuel oil he suspended in 2002, authorize Secretary of State Rice to meet with her North Korean counterpart and other six-party foreign ministers, and promise to relax sanctions under the Trading with the Enemy Act and anti-terrorism statutes.

Bush put the brakes on a nuclear program that threatened to set off an arms race in Northeast Asia, erode U.S. alliances in the region, and jeopardize his most significant foreign policy achievement—sustaining cooperation with China.

The president can coax Pyongyang farther down the road to disarmament if he continues to engage in direct diplomatic give-and-take to end enmity. By legitimating deal-making with North Korea as a bipartisan approach, he makes it easier for his successor to follow in his footsteps.

Deal Making and Deal Breaking

Hardliners like former U.N. envoy John Bolton and former Under Secretary of State Robert Joseph immediately pounced on the deal, saying it did nothing to stop the North's uranium

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enrichment program, dismantle its plutonium facilities, or capture the seven-to-nine bombs worth of plutonium that the North is believed to have. Yet they themselves had long fought to deny negotiator Hill the bargaining chips he needed to negotiate even this first-stage deal, never mind achieving further disarming. Delaying a freeze to seek a more far-reaching deal would give the North time to generate more plutonium, fabricate bombs, and increase its bargaining leverage.

The hardliners insist Pyongyang will never live up to its pledge, made in the September 2005 round of six-party talks, to abandon "all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs." How can they be so sure? In fact, nobody knows (with the possible exception of Kim Jong-il), and the only way for Washington to find out is to proceed, reciprocal step by reciprocal step, in sustained negotiations.

If it were up to the hardliners, Washington would never know how far it can get with Pyongyang. They identified diplomatic give-and-take as rewarding bad behavior. This stance rests on a fiction they propagated that North Korea duped President Clinton in halting its plutonium program while starting a covert uranium enrichment effort. As President Bush put it on March 6, 2003, "My predecessor, in a good-faith effort, entered into a framework agreement. The United States honored its side of the agreement; North Korea didn't. While we felt the agreement was in force, North Korea was enriching uranium."

In fact, it was the United States that first reneged on the 1994 Agreed Framework by failing to reward North Korea's good behavior. Washington got what it most wanted up front—a freeze of Pyongyang's plutonium program, a program that by now could have generated enough plutonium for at least fifty bombs. Washington did not live up to its end of the bargain, however. When Republicans won control of Congress in elections just days after the October 1994 accord was signed, many of them denounced the deal as appeasement. Unwilling to take on Congress, President Clinton backpedaled on implementation. He did little easing of sanctions until 2000. Washington pledged to provide two nuclear power plants "by a target date of 2003," but concrete for the first foundation was not poured until August 2002. It did deliver heavy fuel oil as promised but seldom on schedule. Above all, it did not live up to its promise in Article II of the Agreed Framework to "move toward full normalization of political and economic relations"—end enmity and lift sanctions.

When Washington was slow to fulfill the terms of the accord, Pyongyang threatened in 1997 to break it. Its acquisition of gas centrifuges to enrich uranium from Pakistan began soon thereafter—in 1998, according to Secretary of State Colin Powell. That was barely enough for a pilot program, not the operational capability U.S. intelligence says it moved to acquire in 2001 after the Bush administration refused talks and instead disclosed that the North was a target for nuclear attack. The administration retaliated in November 2002 by halting shipment of heavy fuel oil promised under the Agreed Framework. North Korea, in turn, restarted its plutonium program.

Pyongyang's tactics convinced many in Washington it was determined to arm and should be punished for brazenly breaking its commitments. It convinced others it was trying to extort economic aid without giving up anything in return. It was doing neither. It was playing tit for tat—cooperating whenever Washington cooperated and retaliating when Washington reneged, in an effort to end enmity. It still is.

A New Agreement

While some in Washington did their best to block engagement at every turn, preferring economic sanctions and a naval blockade, neither China nor South Korea nor Japan under former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi would go along, however. They knew pressure would only provoke the North to arm sooner than to change course or collapse. Regime change, if it ever came, would be destabilizing if not downright explosive.

The apparent inflexibility in the U.S. stance led some in Seoul and Tokyo to wonder whether they could rely on Washington for their security, especially when it appeared that some would rather pick a fight with China than negotiate with North Korea by demanding that Beijing pressure Pyongyang to capitulate to Washington's demands.

Under pressure from South Korea and Japan in the summer of 2005, President Bush relented and allowed sustained direct talks. The U.S. grudgingly accepted a joint statement that incorporated the main goal it sought, North Korea's abandonment of "all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs." (When an earlier draft of that agreement had been circulated by China before the second round of talks in February 2004, Vice President Dick Cheney had intervened to turn it down, arguing, "We don't negotiate with evil. We defeat it.")

Immediately after the September 19 joint statement, U.S. hardliners struck back, renegeing on the deal and hamstringing U.S. diplomats. The very day Washington agreed to "respect" Pyongyang's right to nuclear power and "to discuss at an appropriate time the subject of the provision of light-water reactors" promised in 1994 but never delivered, it announced it was disbanding KEDO, the international consortium set up to provide the reactors.

The United States had also pledged "to take coordinated steps to implement" the accord "in a phased manner in line with the principle of 'commitment for commitment' and 'action for action.'" Yet, that same day, Secretary Rice insisted that North Korea had to disarm first and implied that the "appropriate time" for discussion was when "the North Koreans have dismantled their nuclear weapons and other nuclear programs verifiably and are indeed nuclear-free . . . I suppose we can discuss anything."

Pyongyang reacted sharply. "The basis of finding a solution to the nuclear issue between the D.P.R.K. [North Korea] and the U.S. is to wipe out the distrust historically created between the two countries and a physical groundwork for building bilateral confidence is none other than the U.S. provision of LWRs [light-water reactors] to the D.P.R.K.," a Foreign Ministry spokesman said, "The U.S. should not even dream of the issue of the D.P.R.K.'s dismantlement of its nuclear deterrent before providing LWRs, a physical guarantee for confidence-building."

Even worse, the Bush administration, having declared in the September agreement that it had "no intention to attack or invade the D.P.R.K. with nuclear or conventional weapons" and having pledged to "respect [North Korea's] sovereignty," diplomatic code for renouncing military attack and regime change, began sounding its old refrain, "all options remain on the table."

U.S. opponents of a deal then seized on an investigation of money-laundering at the Banco Delta Asia in Macao to block talks. As Robert Joseph told the *New York Times*, "We believe they will reinforce the prospect for the success of the talks." Another top State Department official said the move was intended to turn six-party talks into "a surrender mechanism."

Preventing counterfeiting of U.S. currency is proper, but the Treasury Department frightened banks everywhere into freezing the North's hard currency accounts — not only those from illicit activities, but also those from legitimate foreign trade. Whether it had any chilling effect on trade is not clear, but it convinced Pyongyang that regime change was still Washington's aim.

That provoked the North to test missiles and a nuclear device. To hardliners in Washington, the North's nuclear test was conclusive

proof of the North's ill intentions, and they at last convinced China to side with sanctions. Pyongyang wanted to demonstrate not only that it had the bomb, but also that it would never bow to American or Chinese pressure. Only U.S. willingness to reconcile would alter their course.

Even though Beijing pressed Pyongyang to call off missile tests, the North Koreans went ahead, knowing it would affront its ally. When China went along with a revised U.S. resolution in the Security Council condemning the tests and threatening sanctions, Pyongyang, undaunted, began preparations for a nuclear test. It surmised that China would back sanctions but nothing stringent enough to compel its collapse.

This seemed to box North Korea into the corner that Cheney and others had intended. But when they took office in 2001, the North had stopped testing longer-range missiles, had one or two bombs worth of plutonium, and was verifiably not making more. After six years, it had seven to nine bombs worth, had resumed testing missiles, and had little reason to restrain itself from nuclear testing, or worse, generating more plutonium.

President Bush apparently decided this strategy was not working. He was ready to engage in diplomatic give-and-take and settle for shutting down the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon as a first step.

Next Steps

The most urgent need now is to restore inspectors' control over the reprocessed plutonium, in whatever form it now exists. Assuring a verifiable halt to the uranium enrichment program is not as urgent. U.S. intelligence estimates the North cannot produce much highly enriched uranium until the end of the decade at the earliest.

A critical step will be what the I.A.E.A. calls an initial declaration from Pyongyang, a list of all its plutonium and uranium facilities, fissile material, equipment and components. Whether Washington is prepared to offer enough in return for that remains to be seen. Once that list is cross-checked against what U.S. intelligence has already ascertained, elimination can begin. That should mark the *start* of a negotiating process in which any omissions can be cleared up.

Much has been made of verification. Pushing for intrusive inspections up front—what a top State Department official dismissed as a "national proctological exam"—would put further progress in jeopardy. Other officials suggest that instead of negotiating to inspect every item on North Korea's initial declaration, negotiate their elimination, starting with the reactor at Yongbyon. After the removal of nuclear material and technology on the list, dismantlement of facilities could proceed. Only then would the right to inspect "any time, anywhere" be invoked to clear up anomalies.

Pyongyang says it is prepared to reciprocate if and when Washington cooperates. It will insist on genuine U.S. steps to end enmity—no easy matter after the renewed hostility of the last few years. Only time and perseverance—and the new U.S. emphasis on diplomacy—will tell if North Korea is willing to give up its nuclear weapons in return.



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