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North Korea, the US and the Bottom Line in Negotiating the Future

Selig Harrison

Introduction by Bruce Cumings

Selig Harrison originally visited North Korea in 1972, when he and Harrison Salisbury were the first independent or non-communist American journalists to visit since the Korean War. Mr. Harrison was also one of the first American experts to understand the strong grip of nationalism in North Korea, which he elucidated in his excellent 1978 book, The Widening Gulf: Asian Nationalism and American Policy. He now has more than 20 visits to Pyongyang under his belt, and his most recent book, Korean Endgame is a provocative call for American disengagement with Korea.

It also contains perhaps the best informed treatment that we have of the issues that have animated the confrontation between Washington and Pyongyang over the latter's nuclear program. With that stymied conflict now in its eighteenth year, it is no wonder that Mr. Harrison returned from his most recent visit with a suggestion that "benign neglect" of the nuclear issue might be the best among a narrowing list of American options.

This would be an improvement over the "malign neglect" that best defined George W. Bush's policies toward the North. He waited eighteen months to enunciate a Korea policy, apart from sticking the North gratuitously in his "axis of evil" and telling Bob Woodward and others how much he "loathed" Kim Jong Il and wanted to "topple" his regime. In September 2002 President Bush tabled his new national security strategy, calling for "anticipatory self-defense" and preemptive attacks, resulting in the preventive war launched against Iraq in March 2003. North Korea was a top target of the preemptive doctrine, something particularly dangerous in the Korean context because of longstanding, hair-trigger plans for preemption and counter-preemption if a war appears likely to break out. Within weeks the State Department envoy James Kelly arrived in Pyongyang to use some highly-enriched intelligence to accuse the North of a second nuclear program employing highly-enriched uranium. Pyongyang responded in an entirely predictable way: they did a re-run on fast-forward of the 1991-94 crisis that nearly led to a new Korean War. They kicked out the IAEA inspectors, renewed their withdrawal from the NPT, recovered the 8000 plutonium fuel rods that precipitated the 1994 crisis, and restarted the plutonium complex that had been entirely shut down since the 1994 Framework Agreement.

What was accomplished, exactly, by Kelly confronting North Korea in October 2002? The answer is nothing, except to make available enough plutonium for five or six atomic bombs. The Koreans paid no penalty for these acts, except for more of the ostracism and isolation that they have been used to since the regime was formed in 1948. This period of malign neglect was completely overdetermined by the run up to the invasion of Iraq, and then of course, the

Bush administration's foreign policy got totally overwhelmed by the unfolding disasters of his "war of choice." It is also true that the administration had two (or more) Korea policies, not one: Dick Cheney favored regime change and the State Department favored engagement; Bush allowed endless internal debates and bickering about North Korea policy to percolate, or fester, but did not assert himself to achieve a consensus on what to do. Thus the U.S. did not have a policy toward the North until early 2007, just an oscillation between toothless confrontation and halfhearted negotiations.

The North tried to up the ante by firing off a bunch of missiles on (our) Independence Day in 2006, and then tested a small nuclear weapon in October. As if by magic, malign neglect turned to benign engagement as Washington and Pyongyang worked out yet another denuclearization agreement in February 2007. After years of saying "we don't talk to evil," "we don't do direct talks with North Korea," "we don't reward bad behavior" and the ever-popular "North Korea can't be trusted to keep its agreements," Bush made a deal—one very much like the 1994 agreement that he had carelessly helped to destroy. It was better late than never, but it also capped the worst and most destructive set of American policies toward the North since the Korean War, policies that virtually assured North Korean development of the bomb.

North Korea missile test July 4, 2006

President Barack Obama is now the one to pick up the pieces of a failed strategy that left Pyongyang with a small arsenal of nuclear weapons and a big plutonium reactor still cranking out nuclear fuel. In their discussions with Selig Harrison and others, the North's leaders have now cranked up a maximum position, presumably in anticipation of negotiations with the new administration: they want to keep their weapons, test their long-range missiles, get two light water reactors in return for shutting down the plutonium complex yet again, and they don't care whether the Americans like all this or not, or whether a U.S. Embassy ever materializes in their capital or not. They are nothing if not hard bargainers, and no doubt they will climb down from these maximal positions. But it is unlikely that they will give up the a-bombs that are the residue of Bush's disastrous failures. Can we live with a nuclear-armed North Korea? It looks like we will have to, various hard-line spluttering in Washington notwithstanding. There never was a military solution in Korea, as we should have learned in 1953, and there certainly isn't now. So welcome to the era of benign neglect. ***Bruce Cumings***

"If the idea of discussions on a confederation is raised," said Kim Yong-tae, vice-chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly in Pyongyang, "we can consider it. Confederation remains our goal. But we don't think the Lee Myung-bak administration supports the confederation concept. He is going in the other direction, driving the security situation in the peninsula to the brink of extreme danger."

For North Korea, Kim said, the test of Lee's intentions towards the North is whether he "changes his mind" and accepts the goal of staged movement toward a confederation agreed upon in the June 2000 and October 2007 summit declarations. "We would like to find common ground to move toward the lowest stage of the confederation formula envisaged in the declarations. But at present, he is trampling on them."

I had requested in advance a discussion on North-South relations and was told that Kim was "the expert on the subject." But Kim wanted to talk mostly about relations with the Obama administration and about the nuclear negotiations, as did Foreign Minister Pak Ui-chun, General Ri Chan-bok and nuclear negotiator Li Gun.

To probe Pyongyang's plans concerning the six-party talks, I submitted a detailed proposal for a "grand bargain" in advance. North Korea, I suggested, would surrender to the International Atomic Energy Agency the 68 pounds (30.8 kilograms) of plutonium already

declared in the denuclearization negotiations so far conducted. The United States would conclude a peace treaty ending the Korean War, normalize diplomatic and economic relations, offer food and energy aid on a long-term basis and support large-scale multilateral credits for rehabilitation of the North Korean economic infrastructure.

The North Korean rebuff was categorical and explicit. Its declared plutonium has "already been weaponized," I was told repeatedly during ten hours of discussions. Pyongyang is ready to rule out the development of additional nuclear weapons in future negotiations, but when, and whether, it will give up its already-existing arsenal will depend on how future relations with Washington evolve.

Sixty-eight pounds of plutonium is enough to make four or five nuclear weapons, depending on the grade of plutonium, the specific weapons design and the desired explosive yield. What "weaponized" means was not defined, despite repeated questions, but General Ri Chan-bok, a spokesman of the National Defense Commission, implied that it refers to the development of missile warheads.

Faced with this new hard line, the United States and South Korea should choose between two alternative approaches to dealing with North Korea.

Benign Neglect. Abandon the ongoing efforts to denuclearize North Korea by providing economic incentives and by moving toward normalized relations. At the same time, avoid the hostile policies initially pursued by the Bush administration with their implicit goal of "regime change."

The strongest argument for this approach is that there is nothing to fear from a nuclear North Korea. Pyongyang has developed nuclear weapons for defensive reasons, to counter a feared U.S. preemptive strike, and U.S. nuclear capabilities in the Pacific will deter any potential North Korean nuclear threat.

The purpose of Benign Neglect would be to change the bidding with Pyongyang and end the present bargaining relationship in which Pyongyang uses its nuclear program to extract concessions. But it would be risky, because Pyongyang could well react with provocative moves designed to make sure that it is not neglected.

Limit the North Korean Arsenal. The six-party denuclearization negotiations would be continued with the goal of limiting the number of North Korean nuclear weapons to the four or five warheads so far acknowledged. This would require, first, U.S.-orchestrated arrangements to provide the 200,000 tons of heavy fuel oil promised but not yet delivered to North Korea in return for disabling the Yongbyon plutonium reactor, and second, negotiating the terms for dismantling the reactor so additional plutonium cannot be reprocessed.

The terms outlined to me for dismantling the reactor are much tougher than those hitherto presented: completing the two light-water reactors started during the Clinton administration and conducting the broadened verification process envisaged by the six-party Denuclearization Working Group (the United States, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and North Korea) in a plan announced on July 12, 2008. This would require inspections of U.S. bases in South Korea to verify that the United States has actually removed its nuclear weapons from South Korea, as announced in 1991, in parallel with inspections of North Korean non-military nuclear installations. The inspections in North Korea would include taking samples at suspect nuclear waste sites, a key U.S. demand, but the "weaponized" plutonium would not be open to inspection.

I found evidence in Pyongyang that the hard-line shift in the North Korean posture is directly related to Kim Jong-il's health. French neurosurgeon Francois-Xavier Roux told Le Figaro on December 11 that he had treated Kim Jong-il, who suffered a "cerebral vascular accident (CVA), but he was not operated on. Today he is doing better." This was dismissed as "a fabrication" by nuclear negotiator Li Gun, but I learned from informed sources that Kim had indeed suffered a stroke in August. While still making "key decisions," he has

turned over day-to-day authority in domestic affairs to his brother-in-law, Chang Song-taek, and effective control over national security affairs to the National Defense Commission. I was not permitted to see several key Foreign Ministry officials identified with flexible approaches to the denuclearization negotiations whom I have regularly seen in the past.

The bottom line in shaping North Korea policy is that continued engagement with North Korea will strengthen the pragmatists in Pyongyang in their continuing struggle with military hard-liners. If the United States and South Korea can deal with major nuclear weapons states like China and Russia in East Asia, they can tolerate a nuclear-armed North Korea that may, or may not, actually have the nuclear weapons arsenal it says it has.

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