

Asian Blunders

By Leon V. Sigal

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Summary:

To the Editor:

Defending the indefensible is an occupational hazard for even thoughtful former officials in Washington these days, but Victor Cha's "Winning Asia" (November/December 2007) goes too far. Instead of lauding President George W. Bush's admirable turnaround on North Korea last summer, he would have readers believe that the administration's North Korea policy was right all along.

Many of Cha's claims are at war with the facts. Even worse, they obscure the main lesson that Washington has yet to absorb from the experience: that a policy of pure pressure is more likely to provoke nuclear arming than prevent proliferation. It predictably spurred Pyongyang to accelerate its nuclear program and sowed doubts in Tokyo and Seoul about whether Washington could be relied on for their security.

Cha says the administration was committed all along to "a peaceful diplomatic solution" and "a multilateral approach" in order to test "North Korea's intent to dismantle its nuclear program." That obscures the president's significant shift. The administration began by refusing to talk, never mind negotiate, with North Korea for 22 months. Then it confronted the North over its uranium-enrichment effort and refused to engage in diplomatic give-and-take, instead trying to pressure China, Japan, and South Korea to isolate North Korea and compel it to give up arming. That is what administration hard-liners meant by "a peaceful diplomatic solution."

The futility of that approach became apparent last year when North Korea went ahead with missile and nuclear tests in the face of U.S. and Chinese threats of sanctions. When the Bush administration took office, North Korea had stopped testing longer-range missiles, had enough plutonium for one or two bombs, and was verifiably not making more. Six years later, it had plutonium for eight to ten bombs, had resumed testing missiles, and had little reason to restrain itself from nuclear testing or, worse, generating more plutonium. Who would dare call this a success?

The key to getting North Korea to give up its nuclear and missile programs was never Chinese pressure; it was U.S. reassurance and reconciliation. Only when President Bush authorized sustained and direct diplomatic give-and-take with North Korea and faithfully carried out commitments made at the negotiating table did Pyongyang take steps to disarm. How far the North Korean government is prepared to go remains to be seen.

Despite Cha's contention of harmony, meanwhile, the United States' standing in South Korea has clearly fallen. It may eventually recover from this decline -- but only if Washington starts heeding more of Seoul's sound advice on North Korea. The reaction to the North-South summit suggests that this lesson is still lost on most of Washington. Cha claims that the U.S.-Japanese alliance "reached an unprecedented level of intimacy." If so, then Junichiro Koizumi, the most pro-American prime minister Japan has ever elected, had his heart broken. Aware from two summit meetings with Kim Jong Il that reconciliation between Washington and Pyongyang was critical to progress on stopping North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens and on Japan's other bilateral concerns, Koizumi tried again and again to coax President Bush into negotiating in earnest with North Korea -- without success. His failure paved the way to power for an assertive nationalist, Shinzo Abe, whose determination to exploit the North Korean threat in order to gain and hold power was fatally undermined by Bush's shocking change of course. Now, Japanese policy will be shaped by two Asia-centric men, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda and the leader of the opposition, Ichiro Ozawa, both of whom believe that Koizumi leaned too far in Washington's direction. They want to damp down dangerous rivalry with China and ease frictions with South

Korea. That will do much to ease tensions in Asia, which should be welcomed in Washington.

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