Pyongyang Blues

By Victor Cha and James Kelly

From *Foreign Affairs* , March/April 2008

Summary:

To the Editor:

Leon Sigal's letter "Asian Blunders" ("Letters to the Editor," January/February 2008) misses the reality of what has been a remarkably consistent U.S. policy toward North Korea during George W. Bush's two terms as president: use diplomacy to seek a "peaceful resolution" to the North's decades-long nuclear weapons program. Some figures either in or close to the administration have made remarks suggesting that nothing less than regime change would suffice, but they were and are without support from the president.

Sigal argues that in its first term the Bush administration sought only to put pressure on North Korea. That is incorrect. When President Bush entered office in January 2001, there was a comprehensive review of policy toward North Korea, and at its conclusion, he directed his team to "undertake serious discussions with North Korea on a broad agenda." The review affirmed the 1994 Agreed Framework. As then Secretary of State Colin Powell repeatedly stated, the administration was prepared to meet the North Koreans "anytime, and anyplace" with an open agenda.

It was not until almost a year later that North Korea evinced any interest in a dialogue with the United States, and by then the U.S. government had new information about the North's significant uranium-enrichment efforts, in violation of several agreements, including the Agreed Framework. In October 2002, the assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, James Kelly, traveled to Pyongyang to explain the government's concerns, but he did so in the context of presenting a larger proposal, explaining how complete and verifiable denuclearization could bring Pyongyang an entirely new relationship with Washington. The North never responded to this proposal, and the United States stopped fuel shipments in December 2002; Pyongyang's expulsion of international inspectors from the Yongbyon nuclear facility and the unraveling of the 1994 agreement followed.

Sigal, like Michael Mazarr in "The Long Road to Pyongyang" (September/ October 2007), argues that the Bush administration should have taken an alternative course in 2002 and focused on containing the plutonium at Yongbyon before, or in parallel with, confronting North Korea about its newer and secretive pursuit of alternative means of obtaining fissionable material. In principle, this might have been logical, but continuing U.S.-funded fuel purchases and deliveries in the face of serious violations of the core agreement would have been politically impossible in Washington, even if the White House had sought to do so. And after the North's violations of the core agreement, would Congress have continued to give its mandatory annual certifications of compliance to North Korea?

Sigal argues that Bush was not committed to a multilateral diplomatic approach in his first term, but this obscures the fact that he sanctioned multilateral talks that began as three-party talks among the United States, China, and North Korea in March 2003 and emerged as the six-party talks five months later. Concerning Japan, Sigal says that former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was vainly trying "again and again to coax President Bush into negotiating in earnest with North Korea." This is untrue; in fact, the two leaders agreed that a combination of "dialogue and pressure" was the principle for dealing with North Korea.

Sigal claims that Victor Cha's article "Winning Asia" (November/December 2007) attempts to hide the fact that Bush's strategy changed as the administration's second term progressed. On the contrary, the article admits to a change but argues that it was tactical, not strategic. For example, the United States had held U.S.-North Korean

bilateral talks on the sidelines of the three previous six-party meetings. In Bush's second term, this was expanded to allow the U.S. envoy Christopher Hill to propose such talks as needed on a case-by-case basis in locales outside of Beijing during six-party intercessions -- a practice that was recommended by China as the host of the talks. The contents of any bilateral discussions would then be brought back to the Chinese, who would formulate and draft a six-party agreement. This was the process used to reach the February 2007 and October 2007 implementation agreements.

Astute observers should ask why North Korea did not begin to respond positively to the Bush administration's diplomatic overtures until the time of the September 2005 joint statement and why it did not agree to implement that document until February 2007. The answer is not that Washington merely became more solicitous of the North, as Sigal would have us believe. Rather, systematic diplomacy, in conjunction with international sanctions and pressure, forced North Korea into negotiating seriously. The pressure was the result not of neoconservatives in the Bush administration shouting "axis of evil" or calling for "regime change" but of UN sanctions imposed on the regime as punishment for its illicit business practices, provocative ballistic missile tests of July 2006, and nuclear test of October 2006.

Currently, the Bush administration can boast of a diplomatic process that has gone further in disabling the North's nuclear program than any of its predecessors. The policy has bipartisan support and is widely endorsed in the region by the six-party partners. Each of the North's delays offends shrill Washington voices, but given the absence of practical alternatives, there is really no other way forward. The United States will never accept a nuclear North Korea, and only persistence will bring eventual denuclearization -- perhaps accompanied by other improvements and influenced by some internal shift within North Korea.

VICTOR CHA

Director for Asian Affairs, U.S. National Security Council, 2004-7

JAMES KELLY

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2001-5
