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FIXING JIMMY CARTER'S MISTAKES: REGAINING THE INITIATIVE AGAINST NORTH KOREA

INTRODUCTION

Despite former President Jimmy Carter's embrace of North Korean dictator Kim Il-Sung, and despite Carter's June 19 pronouncement, "The crisis is over," North Korea's nuclear weapons program remains the most serious threat to peace in Asia and to the security of the United States. Because of Carter's intervention, yet another round of diplomacy is underway. A third round of U.S.-North Korean negotiations begins today, and the first-ever summit between the leaders of North and South Korea is scheduled for July 25 in Pyongyang. President Bill Clinton granted North Korea a third round of negotiations in exchange for a promise that Pyongyang would "freeze" its nuclear program and would not reprocess nuclear fuel into plutonium for the duration of high-level U.S.-North Korean talks.

Before Carter's visit, Clinton was preparing to lead an international coalition to impose sanctions on North Korea to pressure it to end its nuclear weapons program. In promising to resume talks with the North Koreans, the U.S. postponed the threat of sanctions. The danger is that Kim Il-Sung may be able to buy more time to build his nuclear weapons. One result, however, is that the Clinton Administration has lost the initiative. The agenda and timetable of the talks once again are largely controlled by Kim Il-Sung.

North Korea already is dangerously close to beginning production of nuclear weapons. Kim Il-Sung's assurance that he will "freeze" his nuclear program merely makes a virtue of a necessity; the nuclear fuel taken from the 5-megawatt reactor in late May must "cool" until about late August. At that time, Kim could order the fuel to be reprocessed into enough plutonium to make four to five nuclear bombs. Kim is suspected of having already produced enough plutonium for two weapons. In addition, Kim is building two new nuclear reactors that could produce enough plutonium to build six and twenty nuclear weapons, respectively, per fuel load. If he builds these weapons, Kim will possess a new, powerful threat to South Korea and the 37,000 U.S. troops stationed

there. The most direct threat to Americans is that North Korea will sell either bombs or plutonium to rogue terrorist states like Iran. But there also is a danger of further nuclear proliferation in Asia if countries like South Korea and Japan lose confidence in American security guarantees and decide to build their own nuclear deterrents.

Clinton must regain the initiative, lost again with the help of Carter, in convincing Kim Il-Sung to abandon his nuclear weapons program. Since 1993 Kim has held the initiative and the U.S. has been reacting to him. His strategy has been to drag out the negotiations, focusing the terms of bargaining not on whether North Korea will abandon its nuclear capability, but on whether Kim Il-Sung will allow inspections of its nuclear sites—or whether North Korea will continue the talks at all. While Clinton is negotiating the terms of further talks, Kim has done nothing to suggest that he is abandoning his nuclear weapons program. Washington cannot allow Kim Il-Sung's nuclear ambitions to be realized.

To regain the initiative against North Korea, Clinton should:

- ✓ **Tell** North Korea that a “freeze” of its nuclear weapons program is not enough; it must also dismantle its plutonium-producing nuclear reactors and spent nuclear fuel reprocessing plants.
- ✓ **Coordinate** with South Korea to make the third round of U.S.-North Korean negotiations and the North-South summit the decisive opportunity for North Korea to end its nuclear weapons program through diplomacy.
- ✓ **Make** clear to North Korea that full diplomatic relations and trade will follow the verified termination of its nuclear weapons program.
- ✓ **Prepare** to resume seeking international economic sanctions if North Korea refuses to terminate its nuclear weapons program, by seeking agreement now with South Korea, Japan, Russia, and China over a program of sanctions.
- ✓ **Use** the current diplomatic lull to strengthen American military forces in South Korea and Japan to deter any surprise attack from North Korea.

CARTER'S INTERVENTION AND CLINTON'S MISTAKES

In less than a day, from June 15 to June 16, President Clinton made yet another of the abrupt policy reversals which increasingly have come to characterize his foreign policy style.¹ On June 15, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright formally introduced to the U.N. Security Council a package of sanctions against North Korea that included an arms embargo, cutting U.N. economic assistance to North Korea,² and ending any scientific cooperation that could help North Korea's nuclear program.²

¹ See Lawrence T. DiRita, “Read My Flips: Clinton's Foreign Policy Reversals In His Own Words,” Heritage Foundation *F.Y.I.* No. 18, June 20, 1994.

² Robert S. Greenberger, “U.S. Proposes List of Sanctions For North Korea,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 1994, p. A12.

The threat of sanctions was a response to North Korea's removal of 8,000 nuclear fuel rods from a 5-megawatt reactor, absent inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).³ These rods, when reprocessed, could make enough plutonium for four to six nuclear bombs. The sanctions also were in response to Pyongyang's refusal to cooperate with the IAEA, which repeatedly had been rebuffed in attempts to inspect key North Korean nuclear facilities.⁴ North Korea withdrew from the IAEA on June 13 and threatened to expel two remaining IAEA inspectors. In addition, to deter possible North Korean aggression, Clinton was reported to be considering sending additional war-planes, plus one more aircraft carrier, to reinforce U.S. military forces in South Korea.⁵

However, on June 22, Clinton reversed himself, suspending the threat of sanctions and agreeing once again to resume talks with North Korea. The catalyst for this change in policy was the visit to North Korea by Jimmy Carter, who had been invited to North Korea in 1991 but could not get Washington's approval to visit the North until early June 1994.⁶ In Pyongyang, on June 16, Kim Il-Sung told Carter that he was willing to allow the two remaining IAEA inspectors to remain and that he would "freeze" his nuclear program as long as the U.S. would resume high-level talks.⁷ Clinton responded later on June 16 that if "North Korea is genuinely and verifiably prepared to freeze its nuclear program while talks go on...then we would be willing to resume high level talks."⁸ By June 22, the Clinton Administration had verified North Korea's promises, and Clinton announced he would suspend sanctions and enter into a third round of high-level talks with North Korea.

In allowing Carter's intervention, Clinton committed a number of diplomatic mistakes that may come back to haunt him in the future.

MISTAKE #1: Clinton briefly lost control over his foreign policy. This was done by allowing Carter to interject himself into the most serious military confrontation facing the United States. Clinton had selected his own envoys, Senators Sam Nunn (D-GA) and Richard Lugar (R-IN), to convey his own message to Kim Il-Sung.⁹ However, after the North Koreans refused to meet the Senators, instead of persisting in sending his chosen envoys, Clinton allowed Carter to go to North Korea even though it was known that the former President strongly opposed the Administration's policy of seeking sanctions.¹⁰

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- 3 Megawatt measurements refer to electrical output. The 5-megawatt reactor also is referred to as a 25-megawatt reactor, which indicates thermal output.
 - 4 For North Korea's relations with the IAEA, see Richard D. Fisher, "North Korea's Nuclear Threat Challenges the World and Tests America's Resolve," Asian Studies Center *Backgrounder* No. 129, February 3, 1994, pp. 3-5.
 - 5 Michael R. Gordon, "Clinton May Add G.I.'s in Korea While Remaining Open to Talks," *The New York Times*, June 17, 1994, p. A1.
 - 6 Frank J. Murray, "N. Korean Demand Unanswered," *The Washington Times*, June 21, 1994, p. A10.
 - 7 Robert S. Greenberger and Steve Glain, "Carter Briefs White House On North Korea," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 1994, p. A6.
 - 8 R. Jeffrey Smith, "'Promising' Signs Seen In N. Korea," *The Washington Post*, June 17, 1994, p. A20.
 - 9 Warren Strobel, "Senator's trip to Pyongyang was aborted," *The Washington Times*, June 23, 1994, p. A1.
 - 10 R. Jeffrey Smith and Ann Devroy, "Carter's Call From N. Korea Offered Option," *The Washington Post*, June 26, 1994, p. A10.

While in Pyongyang, Carter pursued his own agenda. As Clinton was discussing military options against North Korea on June 16, Carter was in Pyongyang telling the Cable News Network that Kim Il-Sung had made important concessions and calling on Washington to pull back from sanctions against North Korea. At one point, Carter even was quoted as telling Kim Il-Sung that the U.S. had “stopped the sanctions activity in the United Nations.”¹¹ An embarrassed Clinton Administration had to state that it had not abandoned sanctions but also felt compelled to investigate the concessions Carter claimed Kim had made. This opened the door for Clinton’s June 23 decision to suspend sanctions. Thus, Carter’s policy—not Clinton’s—had prevailed.

MISTAKE #2: Clinton briefly lost the initiative in the middle of a crisis. After months of reacting to Kim Il-Sung, by early June the U.S. was beginning to set the agenda in this crisis. On June 15 Kim Il-Sung faced the prospect of U.S.-led United Nations sanctions to stop his nuclear weapons program. He had defied the IAEA by preventing its inspectors from analyzing a nuclear fuel reprocessing facility last March and then defueled his 5-megawatt reactor, absent IAEA inspectors, in late May. But on June 16, it was the Clinton Administration that was scrambling to turn Kim Il-Sung’s vague offer to “freeze” his nuclear program into a new diplomatic avenue. By getting Clinton to drop the threat of sanctions in exchange for a chance to discuss this offer, Kim had seized the initiative from Clinton.

The danger is that Kim may be able to set the agenda of this crisis for weeks, possibly even months. Since this crisis began in 1991, the North Korean dictator has excelled at offering half-measures designed to ease international pressure. For example, in December 1991, Kim signed an agreement with South Korea to create a nuclear weapons-free Korean peninsula and to allow inspection of North Korean nuclear facilities by the South Koreans. However, he has—with success—refused to fulfill this agreement.

In January of this year, moreover, Pyongyang agreed to a second round of IAEA inspections but delayed granting visas to the IAEA inspectors until late February, thereby averting United Nations sanctions. In addition, it barred the IAEA inspectors from analyzing a key nuclear fuel reprocessing facility. These moves by Kim were designed to buy time.

The Carter visit will further encourage Kim to believe that the mere appearance of cooperation with the West is enough to avoid sanctions. The result likely will be a prolonged crisis and more time for North Korea to build its nuclear weapons.

MISTAKE #3: Clinton retreated from a threat. By abruptly changing policy and agreeing to a new round of talks, Clinton has demonstrated to Kim Il-Sung that he is not capable of following through on his threats. On May 3, Secretary of Defense William Perry warned that North Korea would incur sanctions if it removed the 8,000 fuel rods in the 5-megawatt reactor at its Yongbyon nuclear complex.¹² This threat was a “line in the sand.” Nevertheless, the fuel rods were removed and the threat of

11 *The White House Bulletin*, June 17, 1994.

12 Remarks to the National Press Club, May 3, 1994.

sanctions was dropped. These 8,000 rods contain enough spent fuel to make plutonium for four to six bombs.

MISTAKE #4: Clinton confused his allies. The sanctions package that the U.S. announced on June 15 was the result of many months of quiet diplomacy and then weeks of high-level consultations after North Korea started defueling its 5-megawatt reactor. North Korea had threatened war if the United Nations imposed sanctions. Both South Korea and Japan were concerned that sanctions not prompt North Korea to begin a second Korean war; their decision to support the U.S. sanctions drive was made with great difficulty.

But having made the decision to follow the American lead, neither country expected that Washington would retreat so readily. In fact, in a June 10 phone conversation, South Korean President Kim Young Sam received Clinton's assurance that he would not change his mind about sanctions regardless of the outcome of Carter's visit.¹³

There now is a danger that Clinton will have a tougher time persuading Tokyo and Seoul to agree to sanctions if this current round of negotiations fails. The next time around, South Korean and Japanese officials will be even more inclined to question U.S. resolve. A new sanctions drive might face even greater opposition from the new Socialist-Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) coalition in Japan. While pro-American LDP member Yohei Kono is Japan's new Foreign Minister, Socialist Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama this year has repeatedly opposed sanctions against North Korea.¹⁴ The Socialist Party has deep ties to North Korea, and Koreans living in Japan who are loyal to Kim Il-Sung are a major source of funds for the Socialists.¹⁵

THE CRISIS IS NOT OVER: NORTH KOREA'S GROWING NUCLEAR THREAT

North Korea's nuclear program, begun in the late 1950s, is very close to giving Kim Il-Sung the capability for the production of many nuclear weapons. North Korea has one 5-megawatt reactor in its nuclear research complex near the city of Yongbyon, about 60 miles north of Pyongyang. Around May 19, North Korea started removing about 8,000 nuclear fuel rods from this reactor. They now are cooling in special fluid and could be ready for reprocessing possibly by the end of August. In fact, the North Koreans may be preparing an excuse to begin reprocessing, claiming that a protective cladding that surrounds the core of fuel rods is deteriorating rapidly in the cooling pond and may present a major safety hazard.¹⁶ If Kim Il-Sung decided to resume his nuclear program, he

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- 13 Kim Sung-pok, "'Crack' in U.S., Seoul Strategy," *The Korea Times*, June 18, 1994, p. 2, in *FBIS East Asia*, June 20, 1994, p. 43; "Carter trip causes red faces in Seoul," *Canberra Times* (Australia), June 14, 1994, p. 7.
 - 14 "Murayama on SDPJ's Policy on Diet, Coalition Ties," in *FBIS East Asia*, May 19, 1994, p. 14; KYODO, "Murayama Opposes Proposed Laws on DPRK Issue," April 19, 1994, in *FBIS East Asia*, April 19, 1994, p. 3.
 - 15 Richard P. Lawless, "Tokyo's Ties to Pyongyang's Threat," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 1993, p. 10.
 - 16 R. Jeffrey Smith, "Officials Foresee Step-by-Step U.S. Strategy at Talks With North Korea," *The Washington Post*, June 30, 1994, p. A13.