

CLINTON'S KOREA POLICY FALLS SHORT: A CALL TO CONGRESSIONAL ACTION

(Updating Asian Studies Center *Background* No. 133, "The Clinton Nuclear Deal with Pyongyang: Road Map to Progress or Dead End Street?," November 4, 1994)

The Clinton Administration's Korea policy, focused as it is on North Korea's nuclear weapons programs, falls short of dealing with the larger question of North-South conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Over two months ago, the Clinton Administration inked an "Agreed Framework" with North Korea to freeze Pyongyang's maverick nuclear program. Despite this agreement, North Korea downed a U.S. helicopter on December 17, 1994, killing one U.S. airman and detaining another on false charges of American espionage. These are grim reminders that Cold War tensions continue on the Korean Peninsula and that the 37,000 U.S. soldiers stationed there remain in harm's way. Nearly two million troops face off across a heavily fortified demilitarized zone. Three decades of on-again, off-again talks between Pyongyang and Seoul have produced no significant progress in reducing tensions. Although a cease-fire ending the Korean War was signed in 1953, the two sides technically remain at war. The Clinton nuclear deal with North Korea does not deal with the totality of this threat. Nor does it address the underlying tensions between North and South which are at the heart of the conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

Clinton's Generous Deal with North Korea

The Clinton deal with North Korea is heavily "front-loaded" in favor of Pyongyang and makes generous political and financial concessions to the North. While enhancing its international status through direct dialogue with the U.S., Pyongyang is allowed substantial delays in fulfilling past promises to check its nuclear weapons program. For example, the North will keep intact for ten years or more the nuclear fuel enrichment facility that it pledged not to possess under a 1992 agreement with the Republic of Korea (ROK). Under the Clinton agreement, therefore, full nuclear transparency in the North will not be realized for a decade or longer.

However, the nuclear issue is by no means the only threat to vital U.S. interests on the peninsula. A key flaw in the Administration's Korea policy is its excessive focus on the nuclear problem. Left inadequately addressed is the continuing high state of tensions between North and South Korea and the immediate danger posed by the North's massive military force, which includes chemical and biological weapons and long-range missiles. The death of yet another American soldier at the hands of the world's most volatile communist regime should remind Americans that, on the Korean Peninsula, serious threats to U.S. interests linger. The Administration should be pressed to rethink its short-sighted policy and vigorously pursue progress in North-South tension reduction.

The October 21 agreement between the U.S. and North Korea needs to be strengthened. In particular, its clauses to reduce tensions between the North and South, if handled appropriately, could serve important mutual U.S. and ROK interests. The Clinton Administration, however, does not appear adequately prepared

or even willing to apply appropriate pressure on Pyongyang to abide by these clauses. The State Department, for example, which brokered the deal with Pyongyang, has not expressed its intention to link steps toward reducing tensions with the benefits offered to the North under the agreement.

Congress Should Intervene

To get U.S.-Korea policy on track, Congress needs to take a more active role. While limited in its ability to make foreign policy, Congress does have the mechanism of a Joint Resolution to express its will. Thus, through a Joint Resolution, it should now construct precise policy guidelines to improve the protection of America's interests and those of its South Korean ally.

A framework already exists for reducing North-South tensions: the Reconciliation and Denuclearization Agreements ratified by Seoul and Pyongyang in 1992. The many ambitious commitments made in these pacts, such as opening the border to citizen exchanges, have never been implemented, and the Clinton Administration, for all intents and purposes, has ignored them, preferring a direct approach to Pyongyang.

Recent statements by State Department officials indicate that the Clinton Administration chooses not to get directly or systematically involved in promoting the North-South dialogue. The process is the responsibility primarily of the Koreans themselves, these officials say. Yet, without appropriate and consistent pressure, North Koreans will continue to avoid contact with the South in hopes of isolating the ROK and driving a wedge between Seoul and Washington.

The time is right for Congress to press the Clinton Administration for improved North-South relations. With a large U.S. troop presence in the South and a resulting defense burden costing American taxpayers more than \$2 billion per year, it clearly is in the vital national security interest of the U.S. to promote substantive inter-Korean political, economic, social, and military confidence-building measures and tension reduction. Such progress not only would ease the threat of conflict, but also would begin to pry the lid off North Korea's closed society and open the way for eventual reform there. It also would assuage an increasingly nervous South Korean government and populace who believe they have been sold short by Washington.

Use America's Considerable Leverage

The North Koreans likely will resist such actions and complain loudly and bitterly. However, they desperately want the new agreement to survive so they can reap significant gains. They are eager for a massive aid package—conservatively estimated at more than \$4 billion—that will be funded mainly by Seoul and Tokyo. Also eagerly anticipated in Pyongyang are diplomatic recognition by the Clinton Administration and an end to the U.S. trade embargo. Finally, Pyongyang is obliged to pursue tension reduction under Section III of the October 21 agreement with the U.S., under which North Korea agreed that it will “engage in North-South dialogue” and “take steps to implement the North-South Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

Since the North reaps great benefits from its deal with the U.S., America has some leverage over Pyongyang. Thus, a strong show of U.S. determination is in order. It was a lack of political will that led the Administration to make too many concessions to Pyongyang on October 21. Past experience indicates that the North will be compelled to behave responsibly only when Washington follows a steady, strong course. America also should look for support in these endeavors from China, North Korea's largest trading partner, and Japan, which eventually is expected to offer Pyongyang a generous assistance package after normalization of relations with the South. If Pyongyang balks at a dialogue with Seoul, this should trigger trade pressure on the North by Beijing and Tokyo and the delay of Japanese-North Korean diplomatic normalization.

A Joint Resolution

To strengthen the standing of the U.S. and its allies under the agreement, Congress should consider a Joint Resolution recommending that the Clinton Administration:

- ✓ **Press for immediate resumption of long-stalled North-South talks and link implementation of the October 21 U.S.-North Korea agreement with substantive and rapid progress in reducing tensions.** This position is consistent with the spirit and letter of the agreement. Section III of the pact calls for improvements in North-South relations.
- ✓ **Revive the Reconciliation and Denuclearization Agreements between Seoul and Pyongyang.** These agreements were ratified but never implemented.
- ✓ **Appoint a seasoned negotiator as a presidential envoy to communicate directly with Pyongyang regarding this new policy and to coordinate with South Korea and other concerned nations.**

In concert with Seoul, the Administration should identify timetables for reducing North-South tensions through:

- ☞ **Dismantling** promptly the North's nuclear reprocessing facility.
- ☞ **Exchanging** North-South liaison offices.
- ☞ **Expanding** North-South trade relations.
- ☞ **Opening** the border to free travel and communication by citizens of each side.
- ☞ **Providing** for mutual notification of major troop movements and major military exercises.
- ☞ **Pulling** back troops from both sides of the demilitarized zone.
- ☞ **Introducing** phased reductions of armaments and troops.
- ☞ **Replacing** the current cease-fire with a North-South peace treaty.

Congress should require that, within three months of the resolution's passage, the Administration report to Congress on the progress it has made in implementing both the October 21 agreement and these recommendations. If Congress is not satisfied, it should consider using its budgetary authority to curtail or block altogether the generous benefits bestowed upon Pyongyang by the October 21 U.S.-North Korea agreement.

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