

# WebMemo



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## No North Korean Thaw from Clinton Trip

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It is one thing to point out that former President Bill Clinton's trip to Pyongyang to secure the release of two American journalists was a success. It is quite another thing, however, to say that the release of the journalists marked a change in North Korean direction, attitude, or policy. Yet numerous articles in the American and South Korean media are promoting that flawed assessment.

Pyongyang's supposed change has even led some to call for the Obama Administration to make a reciprocal concession and soften the U.N.'s financial sanctions on North Korea. Such a change would be a huge mistake—and dangerously ill-advised. The Administration must not back away from pursuing punitive measures against North Korea until Pyongyang abandons the behavior that triggered the sanctions. The U.S. should instead augment international efforts by targeting the other end of the proliferation pipeline, namely those foreign companies, banks, and governments that facilitate North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

As for North Korea changing its spots, South Korean newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* cited U.S. and South Korean officials as concluding that “that there is no significant improvement in North Korea's attitude over its nuclear program.” Despite this reality, there is a growing perception that the journalists' release reflects a diplomatic “breakthrough” with a hope of more to come, a breakthrough that would increase pressure on the Obama Administration to “do something.” Translation: more U.S. concessions.

**North Korean Objectives.** North Korea had several objectives in seeking a visit by former President Clinton:

- It provided the opportunity to show that Kim Jong-il is healthy and remains in control;
- Pyongyang signaled it was willing to continue nuclear negotiations, albeit bilaterally with the U.S. and under North Korean conditions;
- By showing that high-level dialogue was successful, Pyongyang sought to lay the groundwork for a future summit meeting with President Obama;
- The regime sought to mitigate the effectiveness of U.N. sanctions by undermining international consensus on whether such sanctions were necessary; and
- Releasing the U.S. prisoners would increase domestic criticism of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak for failing to secure the freedom of South Korean abductees in North Korea.

Although Pyongyang has not changed its policy objectives, the regime can be expected to engage in a charm offensive during the coming weeks. This would follow the historical North Korean pattern of alternating brinksmanship with seemingly conciliatory gestures. This strategy has been effective in the past and leads to a euphoric reaction in its opponents for simply returning to the previously unacceptable status quo.

**Charm Offensive.** For example, following the release of the two U.S. journalists, Pyongyang freed

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an incarcerated South Korean employee of Hyundai—a gesture that will, in turn, bring increased pressure on President Lee Myung-bak to abandon his “hardline” policy toward the North.

If the Democratic Party of Japan wins the lower house election on August 30, as is likely, look for North Korea to reach out and call for Japan to abandon its “hostile policy” and downplay the abductee issue.

It would also not be surprising if Pyongyang offered to return to nuclear negotiations—albeit only bilaterally with the U.S., rather than through the multilateral six-party talks. In turn for restarting the talks, North Korea would again insist upon renegotiating pre-existing agreements, in this case demanding recognition as a nuclear weapons state and changes to the U.S. “hostile policy,” i.e., a diminution in Washington’s military force posture in East Asia.

**A Tired Siren Song.** In the months to come, a growing chorus of voices will again call for the U.S. to offer more inducements and lower the bar for North Korean compliance with U.N. resolutions. The Obama Administration must reject this tired siren song. Success depends on sustaining extensive international sanctions against North Korea until the aberrant behavior that triggered them is recti-

fied. Principles should not be abandoned for parsimonious progress.

The Obama Administration should affirm that its objective is the complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea and state unequivocally that Washington will not accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. At the same time, the U.S. should offer Pyongyang a path to greater economic, developmental, and diplomatic benefits—but only if certain conditions are met, reciprocal gestures are made, and transparency is established.

**Long-Term Strategy Needed.** Now that North Korea has shifted away from its policy of rapid-fire provocations, the U.S. Congress should call upon the Obama Administration to articulate its long-term strategy toward Pyongyang. A strategic blueprint should describe how the Administration will use all the instruments of national power to achieve North Korean abandonment of its nuclear weapons.

The Obama Administration should also define its alternative policy options should there be no diplomatic solution to the North Korean nuclear problem, as well as contingency plans for a North Korean leadership succession.

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