

# WebMemo



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## Jimmy Carter in North Korea: Ignoring Reality

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During his self-appointed mission to North Korea this week, former President Jimmy Carter engaged in yet another sanctimonious effort to impose his vision onto U.S. policy. His trip was the latest iteration of a predictable pattern of coddling dictators and blaming the shortcomings of those regimes on the United States and its allies. Once again, Carter has demonstrated a dangerously naïve misunderstanding of international affairs.

**Going Rogue.** North Korean leader Kim Jong-il did not meet with Carter but realized the utility of using the visit to burnish North Korea's image and facilitate the regime's latest charm offensive. According to Carter, Kim is "prepared for a summit meeting directly with [South Korean] President Lee Myung-bak at any time to discuss any subject directly between the two heads of state" as well as "willing to negotiate with South Korea or the United States on any subject at any time and without any preconditions." During a pre-trip press briefing, Carter had also expressed hope to facilitate a peace treaty between the U.S. and North Korea.

Carter recommended that North Korea's offers be accepted by the members of the six-party talks to enable resumption of the nuclear negotiations. Such a view runs counter to current U.S. and South Korean requirements for Pyongyang to first acknowledge its two attacks on South Korea last year and provide evidence that it will resume its denuclearization commitments. Although the former President declared that his trip was to reduce the high level of tension and mistrust on the Korean

Peninsula, he ignores North Korea's sole responsibility for escalating those tensions.

Carter has strongly criticized the Obama Administration's two-track policy of conditional engagement and sanctions punishing North Korea for repeatedly violating U.N. resolutions. In a November 2010 *Washington Post* op-ed, Carter downplayed North Korea's belligerency by characterizing Pyongyang's shelling of a South Korean island and disclosure of a uranium enrichment facility—another violation of U.N. resolutions—as merely "designed to remind the world that they deserve respect in negotiations that will shape their future."<sup>1</sup>

The former President blames North Korea's current conditions on international sanctions and diplomatic isolation rather than on the regime's destructive economic policies, high military budget, and provocative behavior. Carter opined that "when there are sanctions against an entire people, the people suffer the most and the leaders suffer least."<sup>2</sup> The current U.N. and U.S. sanctions are, in fact, highly targeted against individual violators of U.N. Resolutions 1718 and 1874 rather than general sanctions against the North Korean populace.

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After returning from Pyongyang, Carter declared that South Korea's deliberate withholding of food aid constituted a human rights violation. He seeks to alleviate North Korea's current food shortages by inducing South Korea, the United States, and other donor nations to resume food aid and assist North Korea's economic development.

Notably absent from the comments of any of Carter's delegation were any requirement for Pyongyang to implement economic reform, accept vigorous monitoring standards to ensure food aid is not diverted to the military, or comply with U.N. resolutions. Despite the inclusion of Mary Robinson, former U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, the group had no criticism of North Korea's atrocious human rights violations. Nor did Dr. Gro Brundtland, a commissioner of the International Commission on Nuclear Nonproliferation, criticize Pyongyang for its repeated violations of U.N. proliferation resolutions.

Fortunately, Carter's advocacy for removing sanctions and resuming dialogue with Pyongyang will have little traction in Washington or Seoul following two years of endless North Korean provocations. During this author's meetings with senior South Korean officials in Seoul earlier this month, there were no indications that the Lee Myung-bak administration would reduce its insistence that Pyongyang make amends for its attacks and provide evidence that it would fulfill its denuclearization commitments.

**What Should Be Done.** At this point, it is not necessary for either the U.S. or South Korea to publicly rebut Carter's assertions. Instead, Washington and Seoul should continue to publicly emphasize that the door to negotiation remains open to Pyongyang if it first addresses South Korean security concerns and resumes its commitment to abandon its nuclear weapons arsenal. International sanctions are the result of North Korea's belligerent actions.

The Obama Administration should call on U.N. member nations to:

- Fully implement existing U.N. resolution requirements, including freezing and seizing the financial assets of any complicit North Korean or other country's company, bank, or government agency. The reluctance of the U.N. and U.S., China, and others to target the other end of the proliferation pipeline has hindered international efforts to constrain North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.
- Maintain international punitive sanctions until North Korea complies with international law and U.N. resolutions. Do not negotiate them away for simply returning to the six-party talks.

Rather than Carter's silence on North Korean human rights abuses, the United States should:

- Challenge North Korea to improve its abysmal human rights record through exposure at international forums, including at the U.N.; and
- Call on Beijing to abandon repatriation of North Korean defectors and allow visits by the U.N. rapporteur on North Korean human rights to investigate refugee conditions in northeast China.

Providing food aid to North Korea remains a difficult policy decision. Clearly there is a need, as the North Korean populace is suffering from the abysmal conditions imposed by the country's economic system. Yet North Korea's track record of belligerency, violation of U.N. resolutions, diversion of food aid, and resistance to economic reform and monitoring requirements undermine support for providing food assistance.

- Large-scale aid should not be provided without tangible changes in North Korean policies and behavior.
- U.N. Development Program activities in North Korea should cease until Pyongyang complies with U.N. Security Council resolutions.
- International development assistance should be subject to the existing rules of international financial institutions. Initial contributions should be project-based, while any extensive, long-term

1. Op-ed, Jimmy Carter, "North Korea's Consistent Message to the U.S.," *The Washington Post*, November 24, 2010, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/23/AR2010112305808.html> (April 29, 2011).
2. Christopher Bodeen, "Carter Attacks Sanctions Against N. Korea Ahead of Visit," Associated Press, April 25, 2011, at [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/42744604/ns/world\\_news-asia-pacific/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/42744604/ns/world_news-asia-pacific/) (April 29, 2011).

assistance should be tied to North Korean economic reform.

**Undermining U.S. Policy.** Former President Carter apparently resides in a parallel Orwellian universe where evil is good, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength. He habitually adopts a value-neutral, even-handed treatment of all countries, ignoring the reality that some are belligerents

and others are victims. Carter's approach threatens to undermine official U.S. policy toward North Korea. With a regime as unstable and unpredictable as Pyongyang, any misstep could have disastrous consequences.

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