

Securing U.S. Objectives in North Korea

A Memo to President-elect Obama

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I have no illusions about North Korea, and we must be firm and unyielding in our commitment to a non-nuclear Korean peninsula.

—Barack Obama, *Chosun Ilbo*,
February 15, 2008¹

PRESIDENT-ELECT OBAMA, during the campaign you stressed the need for “sustained, direct, and aggressive diplomacy” with North Korea in order to achieve “the complete and verifiable elimination of all of North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs, as well as its past proliferation activities, including with Syria.”² When North Korea provided data on its nuclear weapons programs, you stated that:

[S]anctions are a critical part of our leverage to pressure North Korea to act. They should only be lifted based on performance. If the North Koreans do not meet their obligations, we should move quickly to re-impose sanctions that have been waived, and consider new restrictions going forward.³

Yet, after National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley admitted that North Korea’s data declaration “was not the complete and correct declaration that we had hoped,”⁴ you did not advocate re-imposing any sanctions on North Korea.

You also stated that a strict verification protocol was an absolute prerequisite for removing North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, as well as for making further progress in the nuclear negotiations. You called for “a clear understanding that if North Korea fails to follow through there will be immediate consequences.” Specifically, “If North Korea refuses to permit robust verification, we

should lead all members of the Six Party talks in suspending energy assistance, re-imposing sanctions that have recently been waived, and considering new restrictions.”⁵

It has become evident that the verification protocol has significant shortcomings and does not apply to Pyongyang’s uranium-based weapons program or proliferation activities. North Korea declared on November 12 that no scientific sampling of Pyongyang’s nuclear programs will be allowed, that inspections will be confined to the Yongbyon facility, and that divergence “even by one word, [would] lead inevitably to war.”⁶ Yet you have not altered your description of North Korea’s removal from the terrorism list as a “modest step forward” and have not called for any slowdown in negotiations.

You have blamed the Bush Administration’s initial hard-line policy for allowing “North Korea to expand its nuclear arsenal as it resumed reprocessing of plutonium and tested a nuclear device.”⁷ But this ignores North Korea’s role in instigating the crisis. Pyongyang began violating its international denuclearization commitments in the benign threat environment of the 1990s during the administrations of U.S. President William J. Clinton and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung. At the time, both presidents were intent on engaging North Korea and providing diplomatic and economic benefits in return for non-threatening behavior by Pyongyang.

1. “Obama Has Misgivings About Korea–US FTA,” *Chosun Ilbo*, February 15, 2008.

2. “Barack Obama and Joe Biden’s Plan to Renew U.S. Leadership in Asia,” at http://obama.3cdn.net/ef3d1c1c34cf996edf_s3w2mv24t.pdf (December 8, 2008).

3. Jonathan Ellis, “McCain and Obama on North Korea,” *The New York Times*, political blog, June 26, 2008, at <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/06/26/mccain-and-obama-on-north-korea> (December 8, 2008).

4. Press release, “Press Briefing by National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley on the Upcoming United Nations General Assembly,” The White House, September 20, 2008, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/09/20080920-2.html> (December 8, 2008).

5. “Candidate Statements on North Korea,” RealClearPolitics, at http://realclearpolitics.blogs.time.com/2008/10/11/candidate_statements_on_north (December 8, 2008).

6. Choe Sang-hun, “North Korea to Bar Taking of Nuclear Samples,” *International Herald Tribune*, November 12, 2008.

7. “Obama Has Misgivings About Korea–US FTA.”

During the past two years, the Bush Administration has engaged in the direct bilateral diplomacy with Pyongyang that you advocate, but North Korea’s intransigence, noncompliance, and brinksmanship have continued. Nor—three years after Pyongyang agreed to do so—have diplomats yet begun the real negotiations to discuss the elimination of nuclear weapons. This strategy has resulted in the abandonment of important principles, including enforcement of international law and attaining sufficient verification measures.

North Korean denuclearization is a critically important goal, but how it is attained is equally important. Being excessively eager to compromise not only rewards abhorrent behavior, but also undermines the negotiating leverage that is necessary to get Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons. An engagement policy toward North Korea should be based on several key negotiating precepts:

- **Insist that North Korea fulfill its existing requirements.** Pyongyang should provide full disclosure of its plutonium-based and uranium-based nuclear weapons programs before receiving the entirety of Phase Two benefits. Required information includes all nuclear production, weaponization, and test facilities; the number of nuclear weapons produced; and the export (proliferation) of nuclear technology, materials, and equipment to Syria, Iran, and any other countries. Until North Korea fully complies, the Six-Party-Talks nations should not provide all of the Phase Two benefits.
- **Implement a rigorous and intrusive verification mechanism.** The U.S. should insist on verification requirements as called for under U.N. Resolution 1718; North Korea’s accession to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Safeguards, as Pyongyang promised to do at an early date in September 2005; and observance of the precedence of previous U.S. arms control treaties. The verification protocol should include short-notice challenge inspections of non-declared facilities for the duration of the agreement to redress any questions about North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs.

- **Require more detailed follow-on joint statements.** North Korea has used the vagaries of existing Six-Party-Talks agreements to exploit loopholes and defer full compliance. The U.S. should insist that follow-on agreements explicitly define the linkages between North Korean steps toward denuclearization and the economic and diplomatic benefits to be provided.
- **Use all of the instruments of national power** (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic) in a coordinated, integrated strategy. While it is important to continue negotiations to seek a diplomatic resolution to the North Korean nuclear problem, the U.S. and its allies should simultaneously use outside pressure to influence North Korea's negotiating behavior.
- **Realize that talking is not progress.** The U.S. should favor resolving issues rather than repeatedly lowering the bar simply to maintain the negotiating process. North Korea should not be treated differently from every other country in the world. You should insist that North Korea abide by international standards of behavior and not be allowed to carve out another "special status" within the NPT and IAEA Safeguards.
- **Define redlines and their consequences.** The Bush Administration's abandonment of its stated resolve to impose costs on North Korea for proliferating nuclear technology to Syria undermined U.S. credibility and sent a dangerous signal to other potential proliferators.
- **Establish deadlines with consequences for failure to meet them.** North Korea must not be allowed to drag out the Six-Party Talks indefinitely in order to achieve *de facto* international acceptance as a nuclear weapons

state. Repeatedly deferring difficult issues in response to Pyongyang's intransigence is not an effective way to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

In addition to these heightened standards for negotiating with North Korea, the U.S. should deepen its relations with South Korea to retain its influence in the region and ensure that U.S. security interests are safeguarded. The first step should be to extend the current relationship from a primarily military one to one that includes bilateral economic ties. Government and independent studies overwhelmingly conclude that the Korea–U.S. free trade agreement (KORUS FTA) will provide clear economic benefits to the United States, but it will also strengthen ties on the Korean peninsula and ensure that the U.S. maintains a strategic ally in dealing with North Korea.

Conclusion

You have stated the need for an aggressive policy toward North Korea and recognize the threat that it poses. But while denuclearization is critical, the measures used to achieve it are just as critical. You must pursue a policy that does not reward blatant disobedience and disregard for agreed-to measures and that does not compromise on something that is so fundamental to U.S. security.

Specifically, you should abide by strict negotiation standards and not reward North Korea when it breaks them. Additionally, you should deepen ties with South Korea, our key ally on the peninsula. The KORUS agreement will bolster this critically important alliance and continue to build the strategic relationship that is crucial to protecting U.S. security interests and ensuring continued U.S. influence in the region.

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