

The Basic Direction of US North Korea Policy following the Cheonan Incident

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1. The Obama Administration's North Korea Policy: Strategic Patience

The basic crux of US North Korea policy is containing the spread of Chinese and Russian influence on the Korean peninsula and protecting that region's stability. Under this framework, the US pursues 3 basic goals: stopping North Korea from developing nuclear weapons, opposing nuclear proliferation, and removing potential threats on the Korean peninsula. Chief among these is the objective of preventing nuclear proliferation; the next priority is getting North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons, and final priority is removing threats.

Since the election campaign Obama has advocated the Obama-Biden plan, which defines 3 central pillars of nuclear policy: nuclear non-proliferation, nuclear disarmament, and peaceful use of nuclear power. As an extension of this policy, the basic goals of Obama's nuclear policy regarding North Korea are opposing proliferation, denuclearizing the Korean peninsula, and removing threats. Promoting "smart diplomacy" which uses sanctions and dialogue side-by-side, they are working toward the ultimate goal of complete, irreversible denuclearization. However, since achieving denuclearization of North Korea is impossible in the short-term, they are focusing on preventing proliferation and managing the nuclear issue, with a long-term view toward persuading North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons.

The basic framework of the Obama policy on North Korea has not been made public, but US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Stephen Bosworth, who visited Pyongyang as a special envoy from December 8-10 2009, specifically referenced the phrase "strategic patience" during a talk in Beijing. "Strategic Patience" refers to the strategy of continuing to pursue a consistent strategy - despite a series of provocative moves by North Korea since President Obama took office, including a long-range missile launch, a second nuclear test, the detainment of two

female US journalists, and the sinking of the Cheonan - employing a variety of methods, including economic sanctions and military pressure, to persuade North Korea to change its policies, return to the 6-Party Talks and give up its nuclear weapons.

2. Direction of US North Korea Policy following the Cheonan Incident

Since the Cheonan sank into the West Sea on March 26th, 2010, US North Korea policy has been in a state of review. Following the incident, the US issued a rebuke of the DPRK's actions, and bolstered its position on the 6-Party Talks after the ROK released its investigation results. In a speech at the Brookings Institute on May 10th, 2010, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg stated that the cause of the Cheonan sinking would influence US policy toward North Korea. In other words, the results of the investigation would have an impact on future US handling not only of the nuclear issue but also of North Korea's provocative actions. On May 24th the White House announced that "In response to the pattern of North Korean provocation and defiance of international law, the President has directed U.S. government agencies to review their existing authorities and policies related to the DPRK," strongly suggesting that US policy on North Korea was due to change.

Following the incident, a report by the bipartisan US Council on Foreign Relations concluded that in the wake of the Cheonan incident US North Korea policy was at a crossroads. This report suggested that Obama's policy of "strategic patience" had many flaws. For instance it appears that the US is being strung along by North Korea on the nuclear issue, deciding its North Korea policies as part of the response to North Korea's provocations. Further, the goal of turning back North Korea's nuclear program has been criticized as insincere, while the timeframe for achieving nuclear disarmament is vague and the policy of "strategic patience" risks the result of eventual acquiescence to North Korea's nuclear status as a *fait accompli*. Further, various issues such as negotiations, sanctions, and human rights are being handled by separate government departments, and there is much uncertainty about which areas have more urgency and priority. Ultimately, the report criticizes the Obama administration's North Korea policy as insufficient to stop North Korea's nuclear development and proliferation.

While the US re-examines its policy of "strategic patience," its first priority is to work with South Korea to boost its conventional deterrence capabilities against the North. While monitoring implementation of the North Korea sanctions laid out in UN Security Council Resolution 1873, they



also appear to be working out ideas for additional financial sanctions against North Korea. In a May 18th interview with Japan’s Kyodo News Service, US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Philip Crowley stated in regard to the Cheonan incident, “We have been able to use financial steps to apply pressure on North Korea before, and we’re always looking for ways in which we can influence North Korea’s behavior.” Diplomatic sources well-versed in US-DPRK relations are saying that North Korea’s illegal overseas funds are also being considered as targets for sanctions, and the Obama administration considers the 2005 sanctions on Macao-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA), which formerly held North Korean funds, as an example of successful application of pressure on North Korea.

Further, the US is planning to hold additional joint military drills in the West Sea with South Korean forces to block North Korean submarine intrusions. These joint drills are intended as a part of measures aimed at reinforcing weak points in the deterrent force. Thus, just as in the US-Soviet confrontation, a “stability-instability paradox” has emerged, in which it is impossible to swiftly retaliate against a nation possessing nuclear weapons even if that nation attacks another with its conventional weapons. If North Korea, which effectively does possess nuclear weapons, factored this paradox into its decision to attack the Cheonan, then the US must be feeling the need to respond strongly with conventional weapons to punish them for their miscalculation. Also, following this incident the US reevaluated the security situation on the peninsula and decided to postpone the planned transfer of war-time operational control until 2015.

The Obama administration has not established any particular red lines regarding North Korea’s provocative actions apart from UN Security Council Resolution 1874. Previously, the Bush administration set preventing nuclear non-proliferation as a red line, which North Korea ignored by aiding Syria’s construction of a plutonium processing facility. Currently the only remaining red line is that which is defined in the conclusion section of the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR): in the event of a nuclear terror attack, if North Korea is not a member of the NPT then it will be considered the first target for retaliation by the US. In the future the US will likely focus less on establishing red lines and more on ensuring that the provisions of UN Resolution 1874 are being strictly implemented by the international community.

The US is shifting to a policy of recognizing that North Korea does in fact possess nuclear weapons, while refusing to formally acknowledge North Korea as a nuclear power. Since 2008, branches of the US Defense Department including the Joint Forces Command (JFCOM) and the National Information Center (NIC) have described North Korea as a nuclear armed state. However in the



NPR of April 6th, 2010, North Korea and Iran were both listed as countries exempt from nuclear attack, which demonstrates the determination of the US not to acknowledge North Korea as a nuclear power. Hence, the US considers North Korea as a de facto nuclear power, but does not formally acknowledge their status as such. This is because if North Korea were to receive this acknowledgement, they would acquire a new nuclear disarmament card to use at DPRK-US bilateral meetings and the 6-Party Talks. However as North Korea does in reality possess nuclear weapons, there is a need to establish a military strategy corresponding to North Korea's nuclear armament. Hence the US will work to establish military strategies for neutralizing with North Korea's nuclear weapons, while on the international/diplomatic front it will continue to adhere to its policy of refusing to recognize North Korea as a nuclear power.

3. US North Korea Policy and North Korean Regime Change

The Obama administration's North Korea policy, broadly defined as "strategic patience" and traditional deterrence policies oriented mainly around sanctions aimed at changing North Korea's behavior, will encounter many handicaps if North Korea approaches nuclear development as a means of preserving its system. Recently a part of the Obama administration has begun looking to regime change as a possible solution to the North Korean nuclear issue. Greg Schulte, who served as US Ambassador to the IAEA from 2005-2009 and in May 2010 was appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy, said that from the perspective of North Korea or Iran, the international prestige, influence and security gained through acquiring nuclear weapons are much more important than the vague sticks and carrots offered by the international community. Thus he argues that since it is impossible to get them to give up their nuclear ambitions, the US government and its allies should prepare a policy focused on encouraging regime change by indirectly aiding political change within those two countries. Rather than holding nuclear negotiations which serve to elevate North Korea's diplomatic influence, Schulte stresses the importance of working with China to establish strategies regarding North Korea's future.

One suggestion for boosting the effectiveness of a hard-line North Korea policy aimed at regime change is to apply strong security pressure on China; others have suggested building a strategy based on counter-proliferation, which works on the use of military force, rather than non-proliferation such a strategy was adopted by the early Bush administration. Examples of this would be if the US were to form a coalition of the nations firmly opposed to North Korea's nuclear



development (South Korea, US, Japan, Australia, etc.), excluding China, and holding large-scale military exercises directed at China and North Korea; or, selling ultra-modern military equipment to South Korea and Japan and thus raising tensions in the region. This could lead China to judge that the increased tensions on the peninsula are a threat to its “peaceful rise” policy, and thus to take a more proactive role in persuading North Korea to denuclearize.

Nonetheless, it is very unclear whether the Obama administration will choose to take the Cheonan sinking as an opportunity to adopt a policy of regime change for resolving the North Korea problem. It is likely that a regime change strategy would end in failure as it runs counter to China’s strategy of prioritizing regional peace and stability over the Korean nuclear issue. If the US chooses to pursue policies to erode the legitimacy of the current regime, such as supporting various efforts to subvert the North Korean system, further enhancing sanctions, and preventing North Korean ships from using ports, then tensions will mount and the possibility of armed clashes will increase, leading to further US-China frictions over the North Korea issue, which could seriously damage US national interests in the region. Further, the Obama administration, which respects international norms and has adopted an engagement-oriented policy, cannot pursue such a strategy – at least, not openly.

However, if North Korea continues its nuclear development and there appears to be no other means of stopping it, the possibility of the US moving toward a long-term strategy of regime change cannot be eliminated. At present the US is out of range of North Korea’s nuclear weapons, but if the North makes progress in miniaturizing its nuclear warheads and developing long-range missiles, US policy could change. According to the US Defense Department’s Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report, if North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs continue to advance, they may eventually possess strategic nuclear weapons capable of hitting all of Asia, as well as Hawaii and the US West Coast, which would put the global non-proliferation system in peril, disrupt the balance of power in Northeast Asia, possibly prompt an arms race in the region, and expose the US to the North Korean nuclear threat. Due to this change in the global magnitude of impact of the North Korean nuclear problem, Obama cannot continue the Clinton/Bush policy of merely managing the issue; he faces a dilemma in which he must choose to either accept North Korea as a nuclear power or else consider direct physical means of achieving regime change.

If North Korea continues to pursue its nuclear strategy, then China, prioritizing stability on the Korean peninsula, may apply more pressure on them to abandon their nuclear program. However if, in consideration of the succession issue and its worsening economic situation, North Korea continues with nuclear development in spite of China’s opposition, then out of concern for the



international ramifications the US might redouble its efforts for regime change. Furthermore, if the succession process does not proceed smoothly and a sudden crisis develops in the North, the US might be forced to consider military intervention in order to control the spread of WMDs. In that event, since US DPRK policy is tied so closely with its China policy, US actions regarding North Korea are destined to be influenced by its relationship with China. The basic form of the US' reaction to a sudden change in the North Korea situation will be determined largely by its relationship with China, be it one of cooperation, cooperation/confrontation, or competition for supremacy.

