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The Cabal is Alive and Well

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By Leon V. Sigal

[*The contest between the superpower and the mini-state is now well into its sixth, stalemated decade. What changes, however, is the degree of active involvement on the part of neighbor states to try to bring the U.S. and North Korea to reason. In the series of Six-Party talks that began in Beijing in August 2003, while North Korea stuck firmly to its declaration of readiness to give up nuclear programs in return for "normalization" and an end to the state of war, the U.S. position steadily shifted under that pressure - from a refusal to talk to the North Koreans about anything other than the terms of their nuclear climb-down to a series of formulas implying recognition, denying any aggressive intent, and agreeing in general terms to a parallel and synchronous formula towards resolution of the problems perceived by both sides.*

The Joint Declaration adopted at the 4th Round in September 2005 reflected these concessions and encouraged cautious optimism, while leaving open the actual formula of a roadmap leading via mutual concessions to de-nuclearization of the peninsula and normalization. At the 5th Round, in November, however, while the proceedings were marked by an unusual degree of personal accord and even conviviality among the delegates, the U.S. position seems to have hardened perceptibly once again and to have prevailed over that of more pragmatic neighbor countries. North Korea faced the demand for comprehensive nuclear concession before any other matters could be addressed. The US stance on the crucial (to North Korea) demand for a light-water reactor was explicitly negative, and no sooner had the parties departed from Beijing than the KEDO project itself was canceled. The Japanese government has since intimated that it even intends to seek compensation from North Korea for monies expended between 1994 and 2003 on the aborted project.

Under such a return to unilateralism, it is hard to expect a positive outcome when the talks resume, probably in January. Sigal's analysis suggests that "regime change" ideologists have regained control over North Korea policy formulation in Washington. If any progress is to occur in the next round of negotiation, it will require that South Korea, China, and Russia resume a stance independent of U.S. unilateralists and aimed at promoting the resolution of the historic issues that keep the region poised at the bring of war. Japan Focus.]

For four years a cabal of hard-line unilateralists in the Bush administration led by Vice President Dick Cheney preferred provoking North Korea to arm rather than trying what Japan and South Korea thought might just get it to stop: diplomatic give and take.

The United States has paid dearly for this flawed policy: reactivation of a once frozen nuclear reactor and reprocessing plant at Yongbyon, seven or eight more bombs' worth of plutonium, added nuclear leverage for the North, growing doubts in Tokyo and Seoul about U.S. reliability and enhanced Chinese influence in the region.

Still, the cabal survives unchecked. Faced with

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isolation at the fourth round of six-party talks if it did not go along, the Bush administration seemed to relent by accepting an agreement in principle drafted by China under which North Korea would abandon "all nuclear weapons and existing weapons programs."

The ink was hardly dry when the hard-liners struck back, undoing the deal and hamstringing U.S. negotiators. That all but assures the next week of talks will prove fruitless, generating renewed pressure in Asian capitals for Washington to deal.

Pyongyang is not about to settle for fine words any more than Washington is. It insists on concrete signs that Washington is ending enmity as it dismantles its nuclear programs. One sure sign it seeks is the nuclear reactors Washington promised under the 1994 Agreed Framework but never delivered.

Under the Faustian bargain at the core of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, members in good standing have the right to nuclear power. Pyongyang cannot exercise that right until it rejoins the NPT and eliminates any weapons and nuclear programs it now has to the satisfaction of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Washington balked at acknowledging this right, but under pressure from China and others it "agreed to discuss at an appropriate time the subject of the provision of light-water reactors to the D.P.R.K."

Yet, in a closing statement immediately after accepting the accord, negotiator Christopher Hill announced a decision, driven by hard-liners, to "terminate KEDO," the international consortium set up to construct the reactor. Later that day, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice implied that the "appropriate time" for discussion was when hell freezes over: "When the North Koreans have dismantled their nuclear weapons and other nuclear programs verifiably and are indeed nuclear-free … I suppose we can discuss anything."

Pyongyang reacted sharply. "The basis of finding a solution to the nuclear issue between the D.P.R.K. and the U.S. is to wipe out the distrust historically created between the two countries and a physical groundwork for building bilateral confidence is none other than the U.S. provision of LWRs to the D.P.R.K.," a Foreign Ministry spokesman said, "The U.S. should not even dream of the issue of the D.P.R.K.'s dismantlement of its nuclear deterrent before providing LWRs, a physical guarantee for confidence-building." An alternative "physical groundwork for building bilateral confidence" or "physical guarantees" are conceivable, so whether Pyongyang insists on Washington's commitment to provide reactors before it begins elimination remains to be seen.

Even worse, having declared in the September agreement that it had "no intention" of attacking the North "with conventional or nuclear weapons" and having pledged to "respect [D.P.R.K.] sovereignty," diplomatic code words for renouncing military options and regime change, the administration backed away. Under pressure from hard-liners, Hill undercut those commitments in Congressional testimony days later by sounding the hard-liners' old refrain that "all options remain on the table."

Worst of all, Hill wanted to go to Pyongyang to jump-start discussion of dismantlement. He seeks an initial declaration in which Pyongyang lists all its plutonium and uranium facilities, fissile material, equipment and components, which can be crosschecked against what U.S. intelligence has already ascertained.

Negotiating that declaration will require reciprocity by Washington, for instance, participating in the supply of electricity to the North, further relaxation of sanctions, and a willingness to normalize relations sooner. Instead of handing Hill bargaining chips, however, the cabal set a precondition for talks.

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Hill was instructed not to go unless the North shut down its Yongbyon reactor, assuring that no talks took place.

The North has offered to freeze the reactor and reprocessing plant, including the return of all the 1994 batch of plutonium to inspection. Such a freeze is a logical place to begin, but the cabal has made it difficult by blocking any reciprocal U.S. step. Their reasoning is as simple as ABC -- anything but Clinton. The cabal is also likely to keep Hill from amassing enough bargaining chips for an alternative that will give both sides something concrete to show for their efforts -- what might be called freeze-plus -- some token elimination of some of the post-1994 plutonium.

That leaves little choice for Hill but to go for an initial declaration -- a form of words for words. Although Hill sees that as part of negotiating process in which any omissions can be cleared up, hard-liners will surely use it to play gotcha, insisting that any omissions are conclusive evidence of North Korean cheating and grounds for breaking off talks.

So long as the cabal dictates policy, the administration will be better at undoing international deals than doing them, antagonizing allies and subverting U.S. security in the bargain.

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