

[Viewpoint] Our overly patient ally

Overall, 'strategic patience' has flopped. The U.S. has been sitting in the back seat without providing good directions.

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President Barack Obama had a somewhat radical approach to foreign affairs during his campaign in 2008. Advocating a dialogue-first policy instead of omnipotent use of American force, he offered to meet with leaders of rogue regimes like North Korea. He promised a commitment to denuclearize North Korea through "sustained, direct and aggressive diplomacy." Many had expected the Obama administration's "soft power" would produce a breakthrough in the North Korean nuclear stalemate once he took office.

Those hopes evaporated after North Korea turned more recalcitrant and bold in its weapons program and attacks on the South. Three years have passed and the North Korean nuclear problem remains on ice. Washington has either been sidetracked or content to join the international chorus of condemnation. In short, it showed no strong leadership to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem.

The slow progress may be fallout from Washington's so-called "strategic patience," a resolve to wait for North Korea to change its behavior before bargaining for concessions from Washington. President Obama criticized North Korea's April 5, 2009 launch of long-range ballistic missiles for "breaking the rules." He said that "violations must be punished." He maintained that Washington won't sit down with Pyongyang officials for serious talks unless they end such wayward behavior and show sincerity in complying with their denuclearization commitment.

Carrots have not always been the only thing on the menu. Washington has used the stick to punish North Korea's behavior. It campaigned for a new United Nations Security Council resolution after North Korea's second nuclear test and took separate action that resulted in harsh

economic and financial sanctions. It also rallied international cooperation to search North Korean vessels on the high seas through the Proliferation Security Initiative in an effort to stop traffic in weapons of mass destruction. It stopped humanitarian aid too.

Unfortunately, the stick has not been that successful. Thanks to patronage from China, North Korea is somehow muddling along. The more pain it suffered, the more provocative and erratic it became. Following the second nuclear test and the revelation of a uranium enriching facility, North Korean watchers predict the country will be able to develop nuclear warheads to arm intercontinental missiles capable of crossing the Pacific within the next five years.

North Korea's blatant bellicosity finally caught serious attention from Washington.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates early this year said that North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and missiles "is becoming a direct threat to the United States, and we have to take that into account." Worse, Olli Heinonen, former deputy director of the International Atomic Energy, recently warned that North Korea's high enriched uranium stocks could exceed its plutonium stockpile after three years given the current progress at the Yongbyon enrichment facility.

South Korea stands at the other side of the axis in the "strategic patience" policy. The U.S. has so far maintained that Pyongyang must go through Seoul in order to reach Washington for dialogue. It was a strategy to establish an incremental diplomatic process in improving Seoul-Pyongyang and Washington-Pyongyang ties. So far that too has not worked. North Korea turned more defiant, sending inter-Korean tension to the worst-level since the war, after deadly attacks against a South Korean warship and an inhabited island.

Overall, "strategic patience" has flopped. The U.S., which should take the initiative in unraveling the North Korean nuclear conundrum, has

been sitting in the back seat without providing good directions. It appears to be fully respecting the South Korean government's position on the pretext of a stronger alliance, but in reality is dumping the responsibility in Seoul's lap. Its timid approach is hardly befitting to its title as a world leader with a role in ensuring the peace and security of the Korean Peninsula and the East Asian region.

The Obama administration's foreign policy is driven by "soft power," or flexibility in engaging in international affairs. It aims to read contextual intelligence of the security environment to accommodate policies accordingly and reactively.

But in its "strategic patience" with North Korea, such flexibility has been hard to find. Washington must stop insisting on incremental progress and adopt a more aggressive approach to dialogue with North Korea.

President Obama recently nominated Wendy Sherman as undersecretary of the State Department on Asian affairs. She had been outspoken in advising the Bush administration to "listen to the South and talk to the North" to resolve the escalating North Korean nuclear crisis in 2003. We hope she will turn around Washington's stance on North Korean policy.

*Translation by the Korea JoongAng Daily staff.

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