

Comment by Morton H. Halperin

Regretfully, the situation has rapidly deteriorated since the conference was held in Mongolia.

Both the United States and the DPRK have hardened their positions. Nonetheless, neither can get what it wants without negotiations and a way must be found to bring the two states to the bargaining table either bilaterally or in a multilateral setting.

The policy of the United States government still appears to be in some flux. The United States has clearly determined that substantially tougher sanctions are necessary. It is not clear what it hopes to accomplish by imposing the sanctions nor when or under what conditions it would be willing to start rolling the sanctions back.

In the meantime, it will press in every way to tighten the sanctions on the DPRK. It has now succeeded in persuading China and Russia to go along with tougher mandatory sanctions imposed by the UNSC and evidentially to abide by these new rules and perhaps to enforce sanctions more vigorously. I would not be surprised to see additional American efforts to get the UNSC to impose even more onerous sanctions.

In addition, the United States will press other governments to observe the UNSC sanctions and to go further on their own. It will increase the scope of its own unilateral sanctions including so-called third-party sanctions.

The sanctions activity will be complimented by continued, if not expanded, military exercises and pressure on the ROK to increase its military capability and readiness.

While the administration seems to have moved away from explicitly acknowledging that force is not an option I believe it understands that any military action would have horrendous consequences for the United States and, especially for the ROK and Japan. It is not likely to use force except in response to a DPRK use of force. Even then, I do not think the United States would initiate the use of nuclear weapons.

The most immediate danger is that the DPRK will fire a nuclear weapon at what it believes to be a staging area for an American or ROK conventional attack on North Korea. If the current tensions continue or escalate there will be pressure to bring American nuclear weapons back to the theater and even for the ROK and Japan to develop their own nuclear capability.

The only alternative is negotiations. First quiet talks to agree on a freeze for a freeze. Then talks to agree on the ultimate goal of the negotiations—which must be a peace regime and de-nuclearization of the peninsula. Then the hard negotiation of reciprocal steps towards that goal.

9/23/17