

LEON V. SIGAL

A new course for Korea

IT TOOK a nuclear test by North Korea a year ago today to turn President Bush around, but his change of course on North Korea is already yielding dividends — and not just in reversing the North's nuclear weapons programs. It is also opening the way to peace in Korea and improved security for all of North-east Asia.

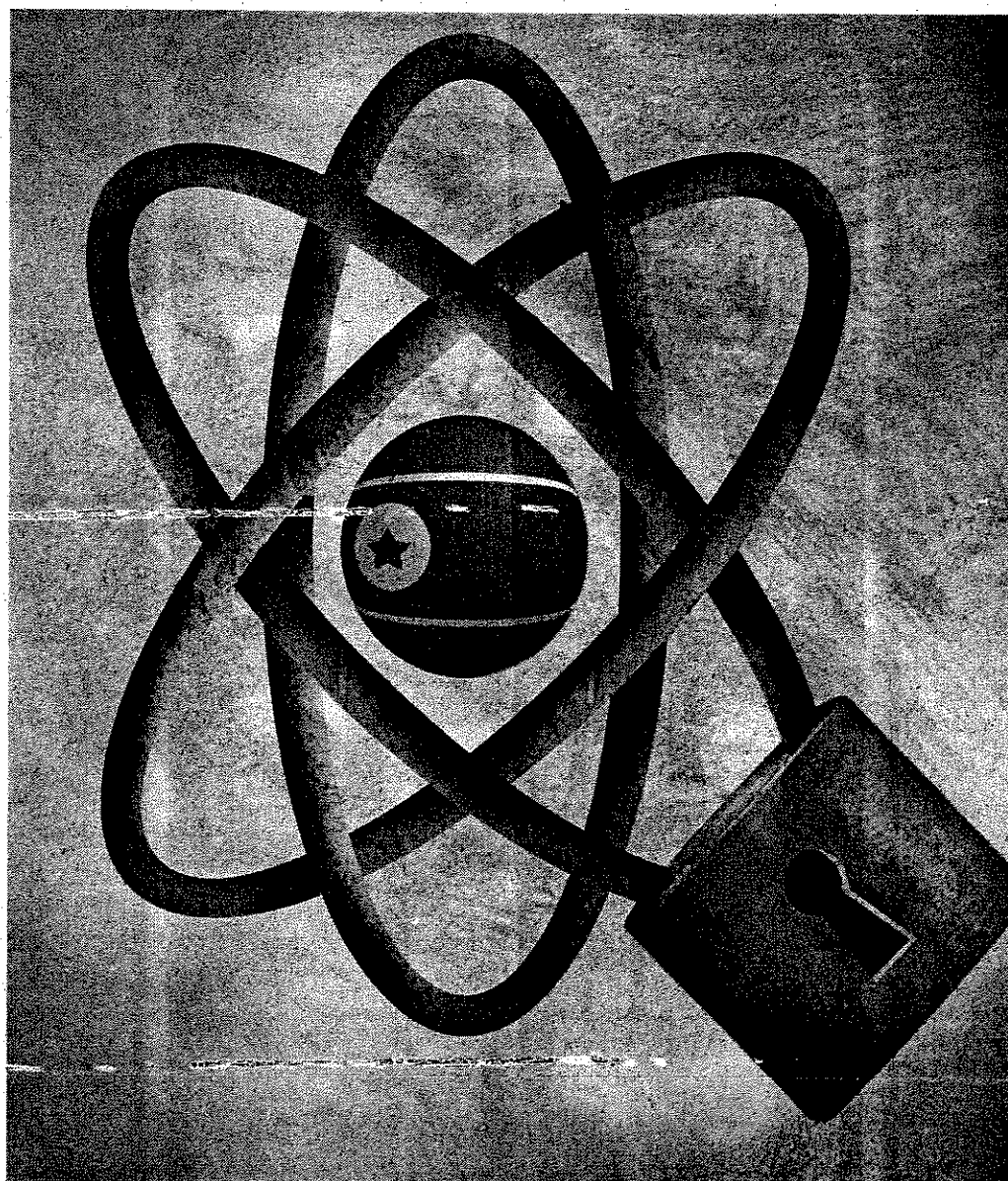
When Bush took power, he came under pressure from hard-liners in the administration and Congress who were spoiling for a fight with China and North Korea. He withstood those pressures and sustained cooperation with Beijing, the key to Asian security.

Hard-liners did get their way on North Korea, however. Far from bringing Kim Jong-il to his knees, they provoked him to accelerate arming. When Bush became president, the North had stopped testing longer-range missiles, had one or two bombs' worth of plutonium, and was verifiably not making more. Six years later it had eight to 10 bombs' worth and was generating still more, had resumed testing missiles and conducted a nuclear test.

The hard-liners' failed strategy was alienating a South Korea committed to inducing change in the North through engagement. It was also strengthening right-wing nationalists in Japan who saw rivalry with China as inevitable and who questioned whether Tokyo could rely on Washington for security. They talked about reviving Japan's nuclear ambitions, which could trigger a regional arms race and jeopardize Sino-American cooperation.

The futility of coercing North Korea became evident in May 2006, when it began preparations for missile tests. After Beijing sent a high-level mission to Pyongyang to press the North to call them off or else face sanctions, the North made the Chinese cool their heels for three days before seeing them, then went ahead and tested anyway. Its testing of seven missiles, including the Taepo-dong 2, on July 4 did just that, prompting China to vote for a US-backed resolution in the UN Security Council threatening sanctions. North Korea, undaunted, immediately began preparations for a nuclear test, a test it conducted last Oct. 9. It was demonstrating in the starkest way possible that it would never bow to pressure — from the United States or China. As long as the United States was its enemy, Pyongyang felt threatened and would make nuclear weapons and missiles to counter those threats, but if Washington ended enmity, it said it would not.

With a North Korean nuclear test impending, hard-liners in Washington were determined to intensify pressure on Beijing to force Pyongyang to yield, but Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice instead persuaded the president to try reconciling with North Korea in return for its disarming.



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That induced the North to shut down its plutonium program this summer. Now it has promised to disable its nuclear reactor, reprocessing plant, and fuel fabrication plant by year's end, making it more time-consuming and costly to restart them. It has also promised a complete listing of its nuclear facilities, equipment, and components, including how much plutonium it has already produced.

The president's new course has brought even more dramatic results in Asia. Last week's inter-Korean summit meeting is Kim Jong-il's response to George Bush's turnabout. He agreed to the first summit in 2000 only after Washington had said it would end sanctions under the Trading with the Enemy Act and pledge it had no "hostile intent" to the North. Ever since Bush backed away from those commitments, Pyongyang has held a second summit meeting with Seoul hostage to reconciliation with Washington. The summit yielded agreement to deepen economic cooperation, which is the only way to bring

about much-needed change in North Korea. It also serves as potential inducements for greater cooperation by Pyongyang in nuclear disarming. So do step to a "permanent peace regime" such as a common fishery zone in the Yellow Sea and other confidence building measures.

Bush's turnabout will also have a positive effect in Japan. It shocked Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, an assertive nationalist, but he was rebuffed in the July elections by an opposition party led by Ichiro Ozawa and replaced by Yasuo Fukuda. Both Ozawa and Fukuda want to damp down dangerous rivalry with China and ease frictions with Korea, which will do much to damp down tensions in Asia and advance Bush's policy of accommodation with China, his finest foreign policy legacy.

Leon V. Sigal is author of "Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea."