

Introduction to the Special Issue

**NUCLEAR POLITICS, NORTH KOREA,
AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY
OF NORTHEAST ASIA AT THE DAWN
OF THE ASIAN CENTURY***

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During the past two decades a China-led Northeast Asia grew explosively to become a new center of the global economy. But throughout this time the strategic agenda for the region was set by the defiant and determined effort of a small, economically failed state to become a nuclear power. This anomalous and paradoxical situation created by the “nuclear politics” of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) provides an exceptionally good window through which the dynamics of international relations in the region can be examined at the dawn of the Asian century.

The articles that follow analyze the protracted and varied multilateral diplomatic maneuvers over the past decade, on an

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agenda set largely by Pyongyang. They cast light on an array of features of the contemporary regional and global international systems. Several are quite surprising. These include: how a small semi-pariah nation could magnify its international power through “nuclear politics” in an age of globalization; how the American global hegemony was constrained from providing the effective leadership (multilateral, bilateral, or unilateral) to deal with the kinds of problems presented by the North Korea security issue; how China, the regional hegemon, was inhibited from conclusively dealing with a wayward regional “ally,” while becoming a major stakeholder in the global political economy; how South Korea, blessed with an economy thirty times that of the North, driven by existential and nationalist impulses and a flexible and innovative foreign policy, was unable to devise a strategy that produced the detente seen in Europe as the failures of communism became acute; and how, the Six Party Talks, a multilateral and multidimensional focal point in the nuclear talks with the potential to become an institution for addressing issues of conflict and cooperation in Northeast Asia, failed in the absence of strong leadership by the United States and China and the obstructionist tactics of Pyongyang.

Despite the extensive literature about and discussion of the North Korean nuclear problem, these questions are rarely asked and even more rarely answered in terms of the global and regional contexts. One purpose of the conference, from which these articles were drawn—“North Korean Nuclear Politics: Constructing a New Northeast Asian Order in the Twenty-First Century” (held at the University of Washington, June 4-5, 2009)—was to place the Korean nuclear talks in the broader context of the contemporary global political economy.

Somewhat paradoxically, a second purpose of the conference was to explore how the domestic decision-making processes of each country affected and was affected by the Korean nuclear issue—an inside-out, not an outside-in focus. Although no paper frontally addresses the issue of the reciprocal linkage between the international context and domestic politics in the DPRK, each of the articles explicitly references this topic—an

approach made possible because all of the contributors are distinguished scholars of both Korean politics and international relations and bring to bear a sophisticated understanding of the issues and events about which they write. Three articles concern the pivotal bilateral relationships for Pyongyang: ties with the United States, China and South Korea. The other two articles take a broader approach, analyzing the subject matter more theoretically and/or refining or redefining elements of the negotiations to provide fresh insight into the process and the policies.

A third purpose of the conference and this issue is to suggest policy options that may move the still stalemated negotiations forward. No explicit effort is made to articulate a multilateral strategic formula, specific national policy options, or the best framework for proceeding (i.e., multilateral or bilateral). However, each article makes clear judgments about the twists and turns of past negotiations and several authors (notably Jian Cai, the Chinese contributor) articulate with clarity and force the continuing national interest of individual countries. The intellectual division of labor underlying this issue is complementary, designed to ensure that the whole is more than the sum of the parts in achieving these purposes.

Kyung-Ae Park provides a highly original case study of U.S.-North Korean relations. Her study covers their prolonged interface on Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. It juxtaposes realist international theory and the influence of the DPRK's calculated "asymmetrical balancing acts." She links, as independent variables, both the structure and dynamics of the international system and the internal decision-making processes while stressing the unusual importance of domestic conditions for Pyongyang's foreign policy because it is not engaged in the web of international interdependence. Since the only way that North Korea can effectively compete with the South (an issue critical for domestic stability) is through developing a nuclear capacity, its choice of unidimensional nuclear foreign policy is eminently rational. Hence the paradox: A rational strategic choice by an impoverished outsider to the increasingly interdependent global economy has succeeded because of the unique, seemingly intractable

place that nuclear proliferation holds in the current international landscape. This policy has worked not by serendipity, but because of the reluctance and/or inability of the United States to develop a strategy linking economic policy (i.e., North Korea survives because of outside economic aid) and nuclear policy.

Professor Park's analysis leads to stark conclusions. The remote prospect of a strategic *volte face* by Washington to meet Pyongyang's specific concerns about external security and regime stability, and demonstrated past success of the DPRK's "asymmetric balancing," make a diplomatic breakthrough singularly unlikely.

The article by Yong Chool Ha and Chaesung Chun has a similar comprehensive and analytical format. It seeks to refine the key tactic of North Korea's foreign-policy "brinkmanship" (i.e., entry brinkmanship vs. exit brinkmanship); to elaborate on the "nuclear dilemma" created by the North Korean strategy of continuing the development of nuclear capacity while purposefully protracting diplomatic negotiations; and to question the viability of the multilateral Six Party Talks because of their structural and operational inadequacies. This article does, in conclusion, offer a wide-ranging set of policy recommendations—specific proposals on policy (e.g., coordination on sanctions among the five nations in the talks—a coalition of the "partially willing") and process (e.g., introducing frameworks beyond the Six Party Talks). They insist that the settlement goals should extend to the future structure of the Northeast Asia region, addressing concrete issues for cooperation while incorporating plans for reunification. It is an appeal for a broader, yet more specific and region-wide, strategy.

Each of the articles focused on bilateral relations has a distinctive tone. Samuel Kim provides an elegantly written historical review of the negotiations that emphasizes that U.S. policy has been at the heart of the deadlock with Pyongyang, especially the insistence on the CVID requirement ("complete, verifiable, irreversible, disarmament") that the United States introduced in the second round of the Six Party Talks in 2004. In essence, it was a request to Pyongyang to concede the purpose of the negotiations before the United States would participate, effectively assuring

stalemate in the multilateral talks. He also stresses that the widely publicized divisions within those at the apex of foreign policy making in the Bush administration contributed to the unraveling of the Six Party process and inhibited the creation of a coherent grand strategy toward the North even during the second term of the Bush administration when there was “engagement” and coherent negotiation. Acknowledging that the DPRK’s brinkmanship and confrontational rhetoric has also contributed to the deadlock, Kim, like most of the contributors, sees the United States as critical to the past failure and the key to any future breakthrough.

The article by Myoung-Kyu Park and Philo Kim concentrates on the changes in bilateral North-South relations since President Lee Myung Bak became president in 2007. Lee has taken a much harder line toward Pyongyang, initially referring to the preceding decade of Sunshine diplomacy as a “lost period.” Nevertheless, he has pursued a policy of cautious engagement even in the face of North Korea’s second nuclear test and defiant “missile firing.” This posture has left the initiative squarely in the hands of Kim Jong Il, his questionable health and economic troubles notwithstanding. The initiative to challenge Pyongyang now rests with the United States and China, as Professor Jian Cai’s article forcefully illustrates.

China—the host of the Six Party Talks, the largest provider of aid to and trade with North Korea, still a military ally with Pyongyang under a 1961 treaty, and the emerging regional hegemon of Northeast Asia—obviously faces complicated decisions regarding all aspects of the Korean nuclear problem. Cai’s article is both revealing and provocative as he describes China’s deep and permanent involvement with the Korean peninsula and relates it to China’s sudden emergence as a “big power” in the global political economy. While China remains committed to “the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula” he also concludes that “From a long term point of view, the Korean nuclear issue is not a conflict between North Korea and the United States, but centers on China’s world strategy and the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy.”

This interesting and provocative statement sets the table for dining on the intellectual food this issue provides. *Bon appetit!*