

## NORTH KOREA'S BRINKMANSHIP AND THE TASK TO SOLVE THE "NUCLEAR DILEMMA"

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*This article makes three points. First, the protracted negotiations of the Six Party Talks brought about unintended consequences of the nuclear dilemma: Technically, North Korea made advances in nuclear development as the talks progressed, and domestically the prolonged talks made it difficult if not impossible for the North Korean regime to move sequentially from the resolution of nuclear issues to domestic reforms for survival. Second, the Six Party Talks are not an effective format for resolving North Korean nuclear issues due to the contending positions of China and South Korea, on one hand, and the United States and Japan, on the other. Instead, a combination of bilateral and multilateral negotiations needs to be adopted. Third, the nuclear talks should go beyond the resolution of nuclear issues to deal with "normalizing North Korea," which includes a future regional order, system reforms in North Korea, and peaceful coexistence between North and South Korea.*

**Key words:** North Korea, East Asian security, Northeast Asia, nuclear weapons

“We really want to give up our nuclear weapons and we are quite prepared to rejoin the NPT and to have IAEA inspectors.” These are quite wonderful put-in-your-pocket kinds of things that a U.S. negotiator just grabs hold of.

– *Charles Pritchard*

### **Introduction**

North Korea once again surprised the world by its nuclear test on May 25, 2009. It was all the more surprising because it occurred in the process of implementing the “The Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement,” an agreement that had been reached in February 2007.

The U.S. response was not to buy a horse for the third time, that is, not to offer North Korea another package deal in return for its promise to denuclearize. China and Russia are voicing different attitudes from the past by expressing strong criticism and denunciation of North Korea’s nuclear test. After several months of tension, North Korea was pressed to walk back to the table of the Six Party Talks (6PT). But North Korea still advanced difficult preconditions, such as that the United States start negotiations on a peace treaty and lift international economic sanctions against North Korea.

Given this new situation, what is so different about North Korea’s brinkmanship behavior this time? What will happen in response to North Korea’s actions? Answers to these questions require a critical look at the operation of the Six Party Talks, which has been dealing with North Korean nuclear issues for the last six years or so, and will provide a background to understanding the actions of North Korea.

This article seeks to address the following questions. First, what can we learn about North Korea’s domestic politics, international perceptions, and behavior that have been revealed in the process of the nuclear negotiations that are different from, and possibly contrary to, conventional understanding of North Korea? Since North Korean nuclear issues began to draw international

attention in the mid-1990s, images of that country have been diverse but essentially negative: famine, malnutrition and stunted growth, political camps, flooding, and an adventurous and dangerous military power. Throughout the negotiations, North Korea has been depicted as a rogue state, an outpost of tyranny, and a regime always engaged in brinkmanship diplomacy. However, in most cases these images reflect the intentions of politicians and policy makers and have been reinforced by the erratic behavior that North Korea has demonstrated in nuclear negotiations. Attention has seldom been paid to the analysis of the image of North Korea as seen through the nuclear negotiation process.

Nuclear negotiations have been approached largely in technical and bargaining terms. They are rarely used as a way to understand the nature of North Korea's system. On the contrary, analyses of North Korea outside the nuclear negotiations have been applied to understand North Korea's approaches to nuclear negotiations. This article will present North Korea as reflected in the nuclear negotiation process.

Another set of questions that this article raises relates to the 6PT. We focus on the structural and operational characteristics that will enhance our understanding of North Korea's behavior as well as the strengths and limitations of the 6PT. We also analyze the linkages established by the North Korean regime between nuclear talks and domestic system reforms or changes as revealed during the nuclear talks in the early 1990s and in the Six Party Talks. By closely examining the interplay of nuclear talks and political and economic development in North Korea, we will demonstrate how heavily contingent domestic reform efforts have been on the success of the talks. Specifically, we address the intriguing question whether or not the North Korean regime lost momentum for system reforms as the 6PT drifted, leading to a situation in which the authority of Kim Jong Il and the general stability of the system weakened.

Finally, based on analysis of the questions raised, this article will make an effort to understand the distinctive aspects of the currently developing nuclear impasse with North Korea and suggest directions for breaking the impasse.

### **A “Nuclear Dilemma” for the Last Sixteen Years**

Negotiations to resolve North Korea’s nuclear programs have been protracted. They began in 1993 and are still going on in 2010. The duration itself is perhaps unprecedented by now and deserving of reflection.

How much do we know about North Korea’s nuclear programs and how much success has been made in negotiations? The 1994 Agreed Framework was launched under the assumption of freezing North Korea’s nuclear program rather than seeking a comprehensive and complete demolition of nuclear facilities in North Korea. This goal was abandoned under the George W. Bush administration for so-called comprehensive, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID). But CVID as a goal was not fully realized even in the adopted “Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement” in February 2007.<sup>1</sup> The fundamental approach to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear programs turned out to be an unrealistic goal even with the preponderance of power the United States held over North Korea. The negotiations have shown that CVID cannot be a fixed goal to achieve from the start; it should be the end result of a process aimed at establishing political security and economic relations. Pure technical and military approaches have turned out to be futile in dealing with North Korea, which approaches the nuclear negotiations as a matter of life or death.

Instead, the prolonged negotiation process has worsened into what we call a “nuclear dilemma.” The Bush administration’s adoption of a multilateral framework to work out North Korea’s nuclear issues, following on the bilateral approach under the Bill Clinton administration, had an advantage in prolonging the talks by instilling fear in the parties of being blamed as a spoiler of the talks. This seems to have created an environment where parties to the 6PT developed a compulsion not to stop the talks and continue negotiations for the sake of negotiating, to the extent of causing “conference fatigue.” This shared

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1. Yonhap News Agency (Seoul), September 2, 2009.

goal of continuing negotiation has produced positive results that would otherwise not have been possible.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the continuation of the talks despite many crisis moments, both the United States and North Korea got what they originally wanted, contrary to their original stances. The United States did not yield an inch in insisting upon a multilateral approach in order to prevent repeating the previous mistake of making concessions to North Korea. But in fact it ended up compromising its goal of CVID, even though the initial agreement did not mention the complete abandonment of CVID. On the other hand, North Korea insisted on bilateral talks with the United States but agreed to seek them within the Six Party Talks. By skillfully manipulating the multilateral format, North Korea avoided CVID and was able to leave past nuclear records and a history of proliferation virtually untouched.

Most critically, in the course of reaching an agreement that is not dissimilar to that of the 1994 Basic Framework, the multilateral formula prolonged the negotiation process for so long that while the negotiations were in progress, new situations developed in terms of North Korea's nuclear programs. Although it is not entirely clear, it seems that North Korea continued to develop its clandestine nuclear program, including highly enriched uranium (HEU) and missile systems along with occasional nuclear tests. *The essence of the nuclear dilemma is that while negotiating, nuclear programs never ceased to develop, thereby creating new targets.*

The nuclear dilemma has also affected North Korea's strategy, not only for nuclear negotiations but also for its domestic reform agenda. In terms of North Korea's negotiating strategies, as time progressed, North Korea developed its nuclear technology and thus generated more options in coping with external pressure. In the 1990s, North Korea's nuclear cards were limited to the threat to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation

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2. On the general history of the Six Party Talks, see Yoichi Funabashi, *The Peninsula Question: A Chronicle of the Second Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007).

Treaty (NPT); the operation or non-operation of a graphite-moderated nuclear power plant that was extracting used fuel and sealing it in rods; the size of its inventory from reprocessing used fuel into plutonium; and precise data about the North's missile tests, HEU program, and nuclear tests. The guessing game regarding the possible number of the North's nuclear weapons ranged from zero to twelve, indicating increasing confusion about the status of North Korea's nuclear programs.

North Korea's demands have also grown in numbers and content, including the demand for direct bilateral talks with the United States, the end of hostility toward North Korea, the end of military training, delisting from the terrorism country list, conclusion of nonaggression treaty, removal of economic sanctions and economic aid (including food), normalization of relations, provision of light water reactors, and recognition as a nuclear power.

Between 1993 and 1994, there was no mention of nuclear weapons. Yet by 2001 North Korea began to show signs of bringing nuclear weapons into the negotiation process.<sup>3</sup> The ambivalence in developing nuclear weapons was yielding to actual production of nuclear weapons, starting in 2002 when Kim Jong Il alluded to the possible possession of nuclear weapons in a meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Jinichiro. As early as 2003, North Korea began to intimidate the rest of the world by entertaining the idea of declaring North Korea a nuclear-weapon state. Such a notion became quite clear by 2004, when North Korea's vice-foreign minister stated that North Korea had weaponized 8,000 fuel rods and already possessed a nuclear deterrent against the United States.<sup>4</sup> This situation is clearly a negative aspect of the protracted negotiation process that has aggravated and frustrated the effort to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue.

A clear dilemma emerges from the Six Party Talks, which took almost three years to actually begin. Producing a joint

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3. *Washington Post*, June 4, 2001.

4. *Yonhap*, September 28, 2004.

statement among the members of the talks has been difficult. The problems are dual in nature. North Korea's attempts to maximize its survival needs frequently gave rise to breakdowns of the talks or interruptions of progress. The parties to the talks also brought their own agenda to them or played their own politics. In the meantime, North Korea had more time available to develop its nuclear programs.

### **North Korea on the Brink**

#### *Exit Brinkmanship vs. Entry Brinkmanship*

What is particularly interesting is that a clear pattern emerges from close examination of North Korea's behavior both in and out of the context of the 6PT, resulting in a paradoxical situation. On one hand, technological development provided new options for North Korea's brinkmanship diplomacy. Brinkmanship is a unilateral strategy in negotiation "by mixing aggressive and provocative tactics, including issuing unconditional demands, blustering, bluffing, threatening, stalling, manufacturing deadlines, and even walking out of negotiation."<sup>5</sup>

But a closer examination of North Korea's brinkmanship tactics reveals an interesting breakdown that helps to better understand the nuclear dilemma for North Korea and the rest of the members of the 6PT. A distinction is made here between "entry brinkmanship" and "exit brinkmanship." Normally, brinkmanship refers to exit brinkmanship, which involves various extreme threats and bluffs when leaving the negotiating table. But equally important is North Korea's entry brinkmanship, which refers to a kind of destructive behavior of North Korea similar to its exit brinkmanship. The goal of entry brinkmanship is to enhance one's bargaining chips and position relative to the other sides. Thus the nature of threats is not the same as in exit brinkman-

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5. Scott Snyder, *Negotiating on the Edge* (Washington, D.C.: United States Peace Institute Press, 1999), p. 76.

ship. Threats signify either drawing attention to or enhancing a bargaining position, while similar behavior in the form of exit brinkmanship takes on more intense and extreme forms. North Koreans also frequently resort to operational brinkmanship in the middle of negotiations, either by threatening to withdraw from the negotiation or by making unrealistic demands just short of exiting the negotiation. The following actions are typical examples of exit and entry brinkmanship:

*Process of Exit Brinkmanship*

- October 3-5, 2002, U.S. Assistant Secretary Kelly visits Pyongyang.<sup>6</sup>
- November 14, 2002, KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization) suspends the heavy fuel oil to North Korea (NK).
- November 29, 2002, the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) adopts a resolution calling on NK to clarify its reported uranium enrichment program. NK rejects the resolution.
- December 12, 2002, NK unfreezes its operation and construction of nuclear facilities.
- December 21, 2002, NK removes all IAEA surveillance cameras and seals its nuclear facilities.
- December 31, 2002, NK expels all IAEA inspectors.
- January 6, 2003, IAEA adopts a resolution condemning North Korea's decision to restart its nuclear reactor and resume operation of its related facilities.
- January 11, 2003, NK announces its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, effective January 11.
- January 19, 2005, Bush's second term begins.
- February 10, 2005, NK admits it has nuclear weapons, accuses Bush administration of stifling it.

*Process of Entry Brinkmanship*

- February 5, 2003, NK reactivates nuclear power facilities.
- February 12, 2003, IAEA finds breach of nuclear safeguards and

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6. During his five-day visit to Pyongyang, Selig Harrison met with Foreign Minister Pake Nam Sun and Colonel General Lee Chan Pok. Harrison quoted the latter as saying, "right now our government has not decided that we need nuclear weapons, but everybody is thinking in that direction in view of the hostile attitude of the Bush administration." *Washington Post*, June 4, 2001.

refers the matter to the UN Security Council.

- February 24, 2003, NK fires a land-to-ship missile into the East Sea.
- March 2, 2003, NK intercepts a U.S. Air Force reconnaissance aircraft.
- March 8, 2003, China's Vice Premier Qian Qichen visits Pyongyang.
- March 10, 2003, NK fires another surface-to-vessel, anti-ship missile into the East Sea.
- March 31, 2003, Han Song Ryol tells Pritchard and Straub that NK has restarted reprocessing fuel rods.
- April 9, 2003, UN Security Council expresses concern about NK's nuclear program but fails to condemn it.
- April 23-25, 2003, trilateral talks among United States, China, and NK in Beijing.
- April 27-29, 2003, first round of Six Party Talks is held.
- June 8, 2005, Kim Kye-gwan says that "the DPRK has enough nuclear bombs to defend against a U.S. attack, and it is possible to build additional nuclear weapons."
- July 9, 2005, agreement reached for another round of the 6PT.
- September 19, 2005 Joint Statement.

There is nothing unusual about exit brinkmanship, which in North Korea's case typically begins with a threat to unfreeze the operation and construction of nuclear facilities. However, interesting patterns emerge from entry brinkmanship.

First, North Korea intensifies its threatening behavior, such as by reactivating power facilities. More interestingly, North Korea fires its missiles, usually into the East Sea (the Sea of Japan). North Korea has attempted to gain Japan's attention through such missile launches. Every time a missile was fired into the East Sea, security concerns heightened in Japan, and Japan issued early warnings against North Korea.

Second, North Korea's entry brinkmanship leads without exception to the resumption of negotiations, either when a Chinese official visits Pyongyang or a North Korean official—including the top leader—visits Beijing. Typically, China appeals to North Korea either by offering positive incentives such as economic aid or threatening to end aid altogether. North Korea's behavior patterns have been consistent in that whether in Pyongyang or in Beijing, both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il have never failed to

mention their commitment to denuclearization as the ultimate goal, as well as voiced economic concerns and hopes for direct U.S.-North Korean bilateral negotiations.

Third, North Korea's intentions and goals become hard to fathom, and in the end somewhat irrelevant. Since the beginning of the crisis in the early 1990s, much discussion has focused on the intentions behind North Korea's nuclear politics. One view states that North Korea intends to develop and possess nuclear weapons for the sake of survival in a hostile regional and international environment. The other view is that North Korea attempts to use nuclear programs as a bargaining chip for the survival of the regime and system. The third view proposes that North Korea has both aforementioned goals. But in reality, as negotiations drag on, it becomes increasingly difficult to attribute any one fixed intention and goal to North Korea, let alone figure out its intentions. In fact, with the possession of nuclear weapons, North Korea can go in various directions depending on the situation and its assessment of the outcome of the negotiations. Compared to the time when it did not possess nuclear weapons, North Korea now is in a tempting situation to set different and diverse goals based on nuclear weapons.

#### *Domestic Dimensions of the Nuclear Dilemma*

The nuclear dilemma also has an internal dimension in relation to system reforms in North Korea. There is no sure way to identify whether or not North Korea ever established a clear linkage between the solution of nuclear issues and domestic reforms. The members of the 6PT and outside observers assume that would be the case. Observations of North Korea's negotiating behavior reveal that Kim Jong Il seems to have selected a sequencing strategy in which economic and system reforms follow nuclear issues. The aborted plan to open a free economic zone in Sinuiju and the lack of significant follow-up measures after the reform in July 2002 indirectly supports such sequencing.<sup>7</sup> In fact,

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7. *Rodong Sinmun* (Pyongyang), July 1, 2002.

there is strong evidence that Kim started the 2002 reforms as a way to demonstrate the will to change in order to impress the United States and other countries just prior to Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly's visit. Also, frequent appeals for food and economic aid in relation to the nuclear bargaining suggest that economic reforms are slow in coming.

It seems that the drag in the nuclear negotiations put Kim Jong Il in a very unsettling situation. Time passed, and the nuclear negotiations brought neither a full victory nor a total failure. At one point, success seemed within reach, but at another point the process seemed to be a revolving journey without an end in sight. Although it may be premature to imagine open and outright opposition to the leadership in North Korea amidst ever deteriorating economic conditions and dwindling social support for the regime, perhaps Kim Jong Il himself felt a sense of failure. That possibility stems from the fact that few tangible achievements have been made under Kim's rule since 1994, glorious catchphrases such as "building a strong and prosperous nation" and "military-first politics" notwithstanding. It must have been frustrating to Kim as the situation could not allow him to make up his mind about economic reforms one way or another.<sup>8</sup> He has been torn between securing a safe external environment for the regime's survival and improving poor economic performance.

The challenges that the nuclear dilemma has presented to the North Korean leadership helps us understand why North Korea has shown such extreme entry brinkmanship at the time of government change in the United States. The radical reactions of North Korea by way of nuclear tests and missile launches have been attributed to succession politics there. While not discarding the importance of succession, Kim Jong Il appears to have decided to take extreme actions out of his own frustration and sense of failure. His political moves have aimed at preempting the further spread of the sense of failure among different groups of elites, since the uncertainties of the nuclear negotia-

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8. Funabashi, *The Peninsula Question*, p. 454.

tions may lead to further division at the top. Thus, Kim's adventure since 2009 seems to stem from domestic politics, though it also took into account the advent of the new U.S. administration. From this perspective the extreme choice of behaviors by Kim Jong Il should be viewed more as entry brinkmanship than as exit brinkmanship. But whether or not Kim's intentions will be interpreted as he intended by the outside world and in particular by the members of the 6PT will depend on the possibility for the countries involved to reach a consensus on whether and how to understand the limitations of the talks.

North Korea is in limbo and confusion about its future will continue to be so unless a breakthrough occurs in the nuclear talks. Though probably sensing an impasse at the moment, the regime may present truly unpredictable behavior in the face of increasing frustration and serious domestic challenges that have long been delayed. The North Korean regime has reached a crossroad where it can no longer wait for a chance to transform external victory into domestic policy initiatives.

### **Critical Observations on the Six Party Talks: Structural and Operational Problems**

#### *Protracted Talks*

It is rather amazing that the Six Party Talks have lasted as they have for more than six years. Perhaps the length of time itself deserves some credit. Beyond that, the talks have produced both positive outcomes and revealed serious constraints as an institution. On the positive side, the talks comprise one of the few regional institutions in Northeast Asia. Setting aside cumbersome institutions such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) +3 (China, South Korea, Japan), the 6PT is the only regional institution besides KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization) that has the clear goal of denuclearizing North Korea. At this point it is not clear whether the

talks have achieved their original goal, but it was the first kind of regional institution to focus on regional security issues and link economics and security. In fact, the talks have been a regional confidence-building process for the past several years.

The perceptions of North Korea may not have changed for the better given its frequent run-ins with the international community: sanctions from the United Nations and regional countries (two major UN sanctions and two resolutions); more than ten withdrawals and threats to withdraw from the NPT between 1993 and 2009; firings of missiles; appeals for food aid; and frequent violations of international norms. But as a result of the talks, North Korea has been drawn out of its closet and gone through an international socialization process (as in the Banco Delta case). The talks started a *de facto* confidence-building process with North Korea. Similarly, the talks have generated invaluable experiences of multilateral dialogue among the five countries in the institutionally barren Northeast Asia, laying a good foundation for future institutional development.

Despite all these positive institutional experiences, however, the talks reveal serious limitations in achieving the goal of denuclearization in North Korea. First, the parties bring different interests and perspectives to the talks. Two distinct groups and positions exist: China and South Korea on one hand, and the United States and Japan on the other.<sup>9</sup> The former group is more concerned with the viability of North Korea's system, while the latter's chief concern is the North's denuclearization. This difference has been a source of confusion and limitation in pushing denuclearization. Different estimations and understandings of progress in North Korea's nuclear programs as well as different approaches to sanctions have been the result.

The differences have been clearly exposed on the question how to realize denuclearization. The United States and Japan have supported CVID, which is not acceptable to North Korea. CVID is an approach that focuses solely on nuclear aspects while

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9. Lee Soo-Hyuk, *Cheonwhanjok Sakon* (Transforming Events) (Seoul: Jungangbooks, 2008).

ignoring North Korea's concerns. On the other hand, China and South Korea try to accommodate North Korea's interest in the linkage between system survival and nuclear issues. In doing so, China's and South Korea's denuclearization timeline seems to be much longer than that of the United States and Japan. The gradual approach has caused confusion as to how to deal with a nuclear North Korea. On the one hand, China and South Korea oppose a nuclear Korea, but suggest an ultimate solution through a longer process. There is hidden optimism in this view that with the North's opening up based on a security guarantee, it will move forward on denuclearization. It is essentially the bargaining-chip view of North Korea's nuclear program.

On the other hand, the position of the United States and Japan has been to pursue either regime change or regime collapse in North Korea, as assumed in the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework.

China has been playing a very important facilitating role in the talks; but it is squeezed between conflicting interests of its own, namely the trans-regional goal of denuclearization and the regional concerns and interests that it brought into the talks. North Korea has been skillfully exploiting China's concerns as well as the differences between the two groups of 6PT parties. Clearly, China has been playing a crucial role in keeping the talks going via its role as host and as a constant watchdog of North Korea's whimsical attitude and behavior. Yet one unintended consequence of the long, protracted negotiation process is a high dependency on China for the continuation of the talks. The recurring pattern of North Korea's return to the talks through China's persuasion has spoiled North Korea and led to its predictably unpredictable acts of brinkmanship. At the same time, the strategic goal of North Korea to be autonomous from China by nuclear politics is becoming ever more difficult to achieve. China is under increasing pressure to shift its view of North Korea from being a part of a regional geopolitical calculation to being a target for denuclearization. In short, the prolonged negotiation process and structural features of the talks have augmented the level of frustration for both China and North Korea.

In the meantime, no country has wanted to be blamed for the breakdown of the talks. Yet the countries involved have become extremely frustrated as North Korea has constantly exploited differences and developed its nuclear programs. This situation has never allowed the members to squarely face up to the question of how to deal with a nuclear North Korea. Only a vague consensus has emerged that a nuclear North Korea is not acceptable. In the meantime, all the members of the 6PT have become frustrated over the lengthiness of the process, to the extent of developing "conference fatigue."

One distinctive feature of the most recent period of the North Korean nuclear crisis is that North Korea is continuing the same spoiled behavior it exhibited in the past, expecting a response pattern through China's mediation while the rest of the members have almost exhausted their tolerance. A second distinctiveness is that North Korea has shown its highest level of brinkmanship by mobilizing every possible means to gain leverage, from launching missiles to restarting power plants. Most importantly, North Korea initiated a nuclear test and nullified the 1953 armistice agreement, indicating Kim Jong Il's bold attempts to compensate for falling legitimacy. Thus, the perception gap between North Korea and the rest of the members may now have reached dangerously high levels.

### *Lessons*

It is clear that mere word play in the form of so-called joint statements at the end of various rounds of the 6PT has resulted in a false sense of achievement rather than tangible progress. What should be the future direction to resolve the North Korean nuclear situation if the United States does not want to "buy the Yongbyon reactor for the third time"? What lessons can we derive from the past six years of the Six Party Talks?

First of all, consensus should be reached as to how to understand the North Korean case. It is clear that the North Korean case is significantly different from that of Libya, Ukraine, or Kazakhstan in that North Korea adamantly adheres to the link-

age between regime survival and nuclear issues. The United States has deliberately avoided this reality so far although there has been a slight change in recent years. In a sense, the North Korean case is becoming *sui generis* in the denuclearization effort. The past six years have clearly shown that a purely technical approach or sole focus on dismantling nuclear facilities does not work unless considered within larger political and economic contexts. For this, it is necessary to take a fresh approach to the problem by establishing a consensus on perceptions of North Korea.

Second, it is time to face a nuclear North Korea as a reality and to develop discussion and negotiations on that basis for a realistic solution. Pretension and collective avoidance will only prolong negotiations without much progress while further aggravating the situation in North Korea. Frankly, it is unclear whether Pakistan without costly U.S. engagement is any safer than a nuclear North Korea. It would be a much cheaper price than the United States now pays in Pakistan to be engaged with North Korea.

Third, the Six Party Talks have served their purpose in identifying differences; but they have turned out to be cumbersome, especially when all the members bring their own agenda to the table. Already, the Six Party Talks have betrayed a "bilateralizing tendency" at several critical junctures involving the United States and North Korea. Larger security and other concerns discussed between the United States and North Korea can be expanded in several regional formats depending on the issues.<sup>10</sup>

While the tension is mounting in and around the peninsula by North Korea's extreme brinkmanship, the countries involved should be able to muster renewed energy by taking a fresh look at the past and by setting a new agenda.

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10. For example, the meetings in Geneva on September 1-2, 2008 and March 14, 2008, in Singapore on April 8, 2008, and on numerous occasions in New York.

## **Solving the "Nuclear Dilemma" in the Future**

### *Understanding the Sources of North Korea's Behavior*

Against this backdrop, current North Korea's provocations after the rocket launch and the second nuclear test in 2009 show the most aggressive entry brinkmanship. North Korea seems to be using every possible measure to show its determination to consolidate its internal political situation, bilateralize the Six Party Talks, and have the upper hand in negotiating with the United States in the future. What are the implications of these acts for the future?

First, these acts constitute entry brinkmanship, because it is evident that North Korea needs to continue to negotiate with the United States, but under different structures. Knowing that aggressive entry brinkmanship results in rising levels of sanctions with the participation of China and Russia, North Korea cannot continue to raise the level of entry. Economic hardships, discontent from elite circles, and uncertainty of political legitimacy with the masses may endanger regime stability. As the level of brinkmanship has reflected Kim Jong Il's desire to resume talks and acquire guarantees for the survival of the regime, the North's current behavior may be interpreted as the beginning of the next round of tough negotiations.

Second, it seemed irrational for Kim Jong Il to raise the level of provocation in dealing with the Obama administration, which has revealed proactive intentions to solve the North Korean nuclear problem by diplomatic means at any level. North Korea itself revealed its positive expectations for Obama's engagement policy in 2008.<sup>11</sup> However, North Korea kept an inappropriately tough stance by announcing that it would not conform to the idea of diplomatically solving the nuclear dilemma, and that it would not give up its nuclear programs even with diplomatic normalization and a peace treaty with the United States. The provocative behaviors followed, despite the Obama administra-

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11. *Rodong Sinmun*, March 23, April 12, and May 2, 2008.

tion's repeated mention of its intention to negotiate comprehensively. We can now guess that North Korea's domestic variables complicated the understanding of its behavior. With failing health, an urgency to stabilize the succession process, and the ambition to develop a "strong and prosperous nation" by 2012, Kim Jong Il needed to express his determination to a domestic audience, which seemed to be irrational to outside observers.

The problem, however, is that this situation will not change with the advent of the third leader in North Korea. Political legitimacy that comes from the authority of Kim's family will be weaker after Kim Jong Il disappears from the scene, and it remains to be seen if economic efficiency will improve to fill the gap that lack of political legitimacy has created. The need to search for the outside enemy by selling the threat to neighboring countries might get higher, which further complicates expectations of North Korea's rational behavior.

Third, it is quite true that only determined and coordinated sanctions will precipitate North Korea's strategic decision to give up its nuclear programs. However, as North Korea's nuclear problems are not just military or technical problems, long-term prospects for the future situation and engagement with North Korea are problematic.<sup>12</sup> Even after multilateral or bilateral talks resume, the vicious circle composed of North Korea's brinkmanship and other countries' multilateral sanctions will repeat itself, with little prospect of solving North Korean nuclear problems in the near future. The so-called "action-to-action" paradigm will not succeed because most fundamental principles of North Korea and those of other countries conflict with each other. As the North Korean nuclear problem is in essence a political problem related to the sovereign status of North Korea, its leadership will not give up nuclear programs unless it feels sure of being provided with material guarantees for its survival. Then, sticks

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12. For various views on engagement policy with North Korea, see Victor D. Cha and David C. Kang, *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Sung Chull Kim and David C. Kang, eds., *Engagement With North Korea: A Viable Alternative* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009).

and carrots focusing on the specific issues of nuclear negotiations will fall far short of solving the problems of "North Korea" as a whole.

These are the reasons why North Korea has kept insisting that it and the United States should start negotiating a peace treaty before North Korea returns to the table of the Six Party Talks.<sup>13</sup> Without material evidence that the United States has given up its "anti-North Korea" policy, North Korea will not take steps to dismantle its nuclear programs. However, the problem is that the two countries cannot agree upon the preconditions for a peace treaty, and even less on the concept of "peace" itself—certainly not as long as North Korea insists that U.S. forces in the South should be removed.

The "North Korean" problem is older than the North Korean "nuclear" problem; the latter is the necessary outcome of the former. "North Korean" problems concern the following: how North Korea will survive in the post-cold war period when most socialist countries have transformed into non-socialist countries; what kind of regime and system North Korea will have if it denuclearizes; and how North Korea will compete with South Korea while resisting absorption by the South. After all, North Korea decided to develop nuclear weapons and carry on a militaristic diplomacy as the most plausible shortcuts to solve the "North Korean" problem.<sup>14</sup>

Five countries in the 6PT have tried to evade facing and solving the "North Korean" problem, because it is a difficult question affecting the future orientation of the North Korean regime, system, and diplomatic position. The structure of the talks is also narrowly focused on the problem of nuclear programs, leaving the problem of "North Korea" aside. Northeast

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13. See *Rodong Sinmun*, *Joseoninmingun*, and *Chongnyonjonwi*, "Joint New Year Editorial," January 1, 2010, and Foreign Ministry of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, "DPRK Proposes to Start Peace Talks," January 11, 2010.

14. See Chaesung Chun, "How Comprehensive is Comprehensive Enough? Dealing with the North Korean Nuclear Problem," *East Asia Institute, Issue Briefing*, October 19, 2009.

Asia's international order, which is based on a strict and competitive balance of power, will be gravely influenced by the future orientation of North Korea, forcing these five countries to deal with the "North Korean" problem directly. Focusing narrowly on North Korean nuclear issues, however, these countries have achieved only minimal agreement on how to manage the nuclear problems, sometimes showing strategic and tactical differences in dealing with specific issues.

#### *A Better Way Forward*

In this light, what will be a different, more viable paradigm to deal with both North Korean nuclear problems and the North Korean problem? First, it will take a combination of more effective and determined sanctions based on multilateral agreement within the UN and among the five parties to the 6PT. It will also require a long-term, holistic vision for a Northeast Asian balance of power in which North Korea finds a place for survival supported by the international community. Faced with inevitably strong and effective sanctions and a vision for a better future for its regime and state, North Korea will be motivated to try to follow a new paradigm.

Second, an appropriate strategic option should include a vision for the future of North Korea that is desirable not just for North Koreans, but also for most Northeast Asian countries. Such a long-term strategy aiming for the next decade should at least visualize a post-Kim Jong Il North Korea with new leadership, nuclear but economically poorer or non-nuclear with more international assistance. With this "shadow of the future" in which North Korea coexists with other powers in an appropriate way, Northeast Asian countries will begin to coordinate North Korean policy. Also, Kim Jong Il's successor will be motivated to follow the new paradigm, free of the inherited burden of a totalitarian but ineffective political-economic system.

Third, the forms and frameworks of nuclear talks should be readjusted and redesigned. The current Six Party Talks originated from the U.S. intention to multilateralize the talks to lessen the

U.S. burden and deal with North Korea with other responsible states, perhaps to evade bilateral talks with North Korea. Now the need has increased to hold bilateral talks in various frameworks and link it to the 6PT and UN deliberations. Then, flexible networks of bilateral and multilateral talks should be restructured to facilitate the talks according to impending issues.

The issue areas of the talks should be broadened as well. The September 19, 2005 agreement only vaguely stipulated that nuclear talks are to be linked indirectly with talks concerning the peace process. However, North Korean problems—the peace process, normalization of North Korea's relations with the United States and Japan, and even the question of reunification—cannot be separated. A more integrative framework of talks dealing with all these problems should be developed. Then, a network of talks among different actors should be created to deal with denuclearization, conclusion of a U.S.-DPRK peace treaty, diplomatic normalization, and economic assistance to stabilize North Korea. Raising the level of participants from assistant secretary to foreign minister also needs to be considered to deal with more political and long-term strategic issues.

Fourth, North Korea's fear of being engaged after giving up nuclear programs is directly related to the question of reunification. Most important is the prospect of being reunified by absorption, a prospect that prevents the North from making a strategic decision. Any South Korean mention, especially by conservatives, about absorbing the North has scared the North. Hence, a new discourse about reunification that includes the future of North Korea will be necessary. Future visions for peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas, once North Korea has normalized external relations and become more open, might lessen North Korea's fear of absorption into the South in a short-term period.

Fifth, these plans will be more persuasive the more concrete they are. Such plans will not only address denuclearizing North Korea, but also "normalizing" it, which very nearly amounts to a state-building process.<sup>15</sup> The project of "normalizing North

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15. For a similar project, see Charles Wolf, Jr. and Norman D. Levin, *Modern-*

Korea" is a political, diplomatic, military, economic, and socio-cultural one that concerns long-term policy areas such as education, infrastructure, and state finance. Given these long-term policies, North Korea will get a signal that neighboring countries seriously care about the future of North Korea, not just by giving economic incentives that in fact aim at destroying its system, but by laying the foundation for coexistence.

Finally, even with these plans, there might be contingencies. However, planning for contingencies are only meaningful when there are coordinated plans to deal with a "normal" North Korea. Planning only for contingencies, such as the implosion of North Korea, that arise out of the instability of a succession process or ongoing economic hardship, will not be sufficient. The United States, South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia need to work toward the most desirable outcomes and then pay attention to contingencies.

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