



Park Geun-Hye's China Challenge



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By Peter Hayes

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I. Introduction

Is it possible for President Park to get China to commit to more than a symbolic statement regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons program during her upcoming meeting with President Xi Jinping? According to Peter Hayes, "The answer is definitely yes. South Korea can propose at least three types of "three party talks" at the Summit that would put South Korea in the driver's seat, and break the deadlock with North Korea. These are all consistent with the eventual resumption of the Six Party Talks, although they do not depend upon this happening to have positive effects." He goes on to state that, "At this juncture, only President Park can provide the necessary leadership to move this agenda forward."

Peter Hayes is the Executive Director of the Nautilus Institute and a Professor at RMIT University.

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II. Article by Peter Hayes

Park Geun-Hye's China Challenge

Whether South Korean President Park *Geun-hye's* “trust politik”[\[i\]](#) is merely a slogan or a solid policy strategy will be revealed in the summit between South Korean President PGH and Chinese President Xi Jinping on June 27, 2013.

North Korea's blizzard of nuclear threat rhetoric in March-April put maximum pressure on China to deliver the United States to talks on terms acceptable to the DPRK. The risk to North Korea of this tactic backfiring was low. If China succeeded, then the DPRK would have succeeded in its goal of re-engaging the United States, but this was a small chance. If China failed, then it would have a hard time insisting to the North that it should turn up talks doomed to collapse at the outset.

On June 13, 2013, the North Korean National Defense Commission issued a statement that declared that North Korea remains committed to a non-nuclear future, but only when “the whole Korean Peninsula is denuclearized and the nuclear threats from outside are put to a final end.”[\[ii\]](#) This statement underscored that the DPRK is serious about talking with the United States, but only if its core security concerns are addressed.

Although the United States and China aligned their stance at the June 9, 2013 Obama-Xi summit by declaring that neither country will accept North Korea as a nuclear-armed state and will “work together to deepen co-operation and dialogue to achieve denuclearization,”[\[iii\]](#) they did not converge on a meaningful strategic framework within which to induce North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons, or even to manage the strategic instability that arises from its existing crude nuclear devices.

Thus, China proved unable to change the United States precondition that the DPRK must demonstrate its sincerity before returning to talks by enacting its previous commitments according to the September 2007 principles issued by the Six Party Talk negotiators.

The visit to Beijing by North Korea's nuclear negotiator Ambassador Kim Kye Gwan on June 19, 2013 [\[iv\]](#) was to simply compare notes about American obduracy, and to tell China: “We told you so.”

The US opposition to resuming high level talks is also grounded in its perception that Kim Jong Un's extraordinary nuclear threat rhetoric in March and April, including its first threat to use nuclear weapons against cities in South Korea, Japan, and the United States, possibly pre-emptively, revealed an inexperienced, untested leader characterized by erratic, dangerous talk combined with provocative actions such as a nuclear test and rocket launch.

Thus, the United States will discount North Korea's offer to talk about nuclear abolition and denuclearization until it exhibits a more consistent, calm behavior without reverting to extortionate nuclear threats.

Superficially, the combined US and North Korean hard lines leave little space for President Park to obtain more from China than a similar joint statement to that issued by President's Xi and Obama. She will almost certainly get such a statement which was prefigured by President Xi's response to Ambassador Kim's visit wherein he stated in his letter to Kim Jong Un that the Chinese-North Korean alliance aims to “defend peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula”[\[v\]](#)—a remarkable shift to an even-handed approach by China. Although useful to Park for domestic consumption, a joint statement that a nuclear armed North Korea is not acceptable will do nothing to resolve the fundamental nuclear problem with North Korea.

Is it possible for President Park to get more from China than a symbolic statement?

The answer is definitely yes. South Korea can propose at least three types of “three party talks” at the Summit that would put South Korea in the driver’s seat, and break the deadlock with North Korea. These are all consistent with the eventual resumption of the Six Party Talks, although they do not depend upon this happening to have positive effects.

The first and most important trilateral engagement would lend substance to her “Northeast Asia Peace Initiative.” The substance of such an Initiative was discussed at the just-concluded Envisioning Northeast Asia Peace and Security System in Seoul, convened by Hanshin and Nagasaki Universities in cooperation with Nautilus Institute.

At minimum, a regional framework that could reverse North Korea’s nuclear breakout requires a regional treaty of amity and cooperation that realizes the following, interrelated outcomes.

- Termination of a state of war;
- Creation of a permanent security council to monitor compliance and decide on violations;
- Mutual declaration of no hostile intent;
- Provisions of assistance for nuclear and other energy;
- Termination of sanctions; and
- A Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone.

As outlined by Morton Halperin,[\[vi\]](#) this regional security settlement would be a comprehensive agreement or treaty that would require ratification by a number of states, although adherence to sections of the settlement would be specific to the signatory states. Provisions would come into effect in a phased manner – immediately upon ratification or when various conditions are met.

The benefits that might flow to North Korea—in particular, a guarantee that it would not be attacked with nuclear weapons under the Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone as demanded in the North’s June 13—would occur only if the North fully dismantled its nuclear capabilities under monitoring and verification by the International Atomic Energy Agency or a substitute regional inspectorate established as part of the treaty. Non-nuclear states such as South Korea and Japan could pull out of the treaty after five years if the North had not dismantled its nuclear program by then.

The exact sequencing and how best to kick-start each of these elements is not important. What is critical is for Korea to enjoin the United States and China to spell out what a new strategic partnership between the two powers means when it comes to solving the North Korean nuclear problem.

South Korea may lack the great power needed to impose a new order. But it does have the geopolitical location, moral power, and ideational capacity to delineate a new strategic framework that shapes the geostrategic environment rather than trying to manage North Korea’s bad behavior at the margin.

South Korea’s second “trilateral” should propose to China that it work with the South and the United States to generate a common position on exactly what North Korea must do to obtain a legally binding guarantee that it won’t be attacked with nuclear weapons. At this time, such a common position does not exist. Creating such an understanding will take time, and must be done in advance of serious engagement with the North, not in the midst of negotiations.

There are many technical and policy issues that must be determined. For example, would the intrusive monitoring and verification needed to re-establish confidence that the North has dismantled its nuclear weapon and weapons-related fuel cycle activities, and is genuinely committed to non-nuclear weapons state status be mirrored in South Korea? Would the United States submit its facilities in the South to North Korean inspection? Would North Korea also have to enact measures required by UN Security Council Resolution 1540 to control non-state actors engaged in nuclear weapons related smuggling and trade of fissile material and dual use technology? What arrangements would be needed to provide nuclear power in the North to supplant its likely dangerous light water reactor under construction at Yongbyon, and how would low-enriched uranium be provided for such a reactor?

If the positions of China, the United States, and South Korea are aligned that North Korea must not remain a nuclear-armed state, then it is incumbent upon these three states to specify exactly what North Korea must do to achieve this status, what they would get in return for it, and to present this united position to the North to consider.

The third trilateral is to enact inter-Korean trust-building in partnership with China. China's understandable stance after the 2013 nuclear test and rocket firing is to tighten its sanctions on trade, investment, and financing that relates to North Korean nuclear weapons and related activities, but to increase non-sanctioned, legitimate economic and humanitarian trade, financing and investment. China takes this position primarily to maintain stability in North Korea; but also to extract a price for providing an implicit security guarantee to North Korea, provided it does not start a war or commit overt aggression against South Korea.

President Park should propose a cooperative approach whereby Chinese and South Korean joint ventures are created to participate in this legitimate economic engagement, to invest in the Chinese-DPRK free trade zones on the Yalu River and elsewhere; and to solicit Chinese investment in Kaesong in return for expanded ROK-Chinese economic support in the rest of the DPRK. The South Korean government would cover the sovereign risk faced by South Korean partners in such joint ventures. This trilateral approach would use market-based mechanisms to implement the engagement strategy involving China and the two Koreas, not government agencies. Being based on market principles, it would be self-regulating.

This trilateral should be separated from the nuclear issue but implemented to international standards of occupational health and safety, work place human rights, and modern management and commercial principles. China has already begun to insist on more stringent standards in its bilateral trade, for example, requiring coal imports from the North to be measured carefully before delivery. South Korean joint ventures could enhance greatly the ability of China to finance the necessary training and infrastructure, and to conduct enterprise-level training. For the North, this approach dilutes its dependency on China and would lead to tangible economic gains—crucial in the medium-term for Kim Jong Un's ability to reform the DPRK economy and to sustain his leadership.

A specific angle for Chinese-South Korean technical assistance to the North could build on Obama-Xi summit commitment to work together to rid the world of the use of climate and ozone-layer destroying hydro-fluorocarbons from industry [\[vii\]](#) by working with the North to implement this change in industrial practice.

These three trilateral approaches will lend substance to President Park's notion of trust-building with North Korea and will enlist China and the United States in collaborations led by South Korea.

Such three-party approaches would lay the basis for resumed six party dialogues, which may also include four party effort to end the Korean Armistice Agreement and to create a Peace Treaty.

In this manner, South Korea may start the process whereby the full set of the six necessary enabling conditions for denuclearizing North Korea are established—a process that will take some years to negotiate in full in a six party framework.

Nonetheless, is entirely feasible to constitute all six elements of a new strategic framework provided all parties to the Korean conflict maintain a clear focus and avoid tactical skirmishes and needless delays over relatively minor issues.

At this juncture, only President Park can provide the necessary leadership to move this agenda forward.

III. References

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org