

US-DPRK Normalization and Resolving Tensions on the Korean Peninsula

Joel S. Wit

Background

The step-by-step approach towards resolving the North Korean nuclear issue begun during the Bush Administration and continued under President Obama's policy of "strategic patience" has reached a dead end. Indeed, a strong case can be made that Pyongyang's programs to build nuclear weapons as well as to produce more capable missile-delivery systems have gained momentum—despite the recent failed missile test—and that by the middle of this decade, the North may well be able to field a small nuclear force of 30-50 nuclear warheads mounted on missiles able to strike targets throughout Northeast Asia.

On top of its advancing WMD capabilities, Pyongyang believes it has emerged from the past three turbulent years—attempts by Washington and Seoul to isolate the North, the near confrontations triggered by its own provocations in 2010, various missteps on the home front, the death of Kim Jong Il and the transition to a new leader—with flying colors. One important reason has been the North's engineering of a closer political, economic and security relationship with a China more concerned with instability on its borders than the dangers posed by a slowly growing North Korean WMD program.

Pyongyang's new confidence is reflected in recent statements that its adherence to "simultaneous steps" in the context of moving towards future nuclear agreements no longer applies. This may be a first shot across the bow by the North which, in the context of an ongoing review of its nuclear policy, may drop any further pretense that it intends to adhere to the 2005 Six Party Talks pledge to denuclearize. While hopes that Pyongyang will eventually denuclearize have faded, such a step would send a clear public signal that would further complicate any efforts by other countries to move forward with nuclear diplomacy.

Despite these negative trends, Pyongyang continues to express a strong interest in improving relations with the United States. For example, during a recent private meeting, key DPRK Foreign Ministry officials formally expressed the view that "Marshal Kim Jong Un is not changing Kim Jong Il's line that there are no eternal enemies or eternal friends." This was essentially the formulation first made by Kim Jong Il in the late 1990's that the DPRK and the US did not have to be "100 year enemies." It was the authoritative compass heading for Pyongyang's security and foreign policy, justifying the strategy for his efforts to deal with the US at the highest levels. Since then, the North has sounded the theme rarely (and usually at key junctures) but whenever it did, it was meant to signal continuing efforts to move US-DPRK relations forward. Of course, the key issue remains how important is pursuit of that better relationship to North Korea and what price might Pyongyang be willing to pay for progress on that front.

Jump Starting the Process

Because of the centrality of the US-DPRK relationship to events on the peninsula, normalization of relations will be the key component of any effort to reach a comprehensive agreement. Creating political momentum in support of such an objective will require significant changes in the existing policy-making situation, particularly in the three components shaping that environment.

- **National Interest:** This is perhaps the most obvious rationale for a new more ambitious approach since the danger of severe instability on the peninsula is a threat to U.S. national interests as well as those of its allies, the region and the international community. That danger ranges from the threat of another Korean War triggered by further provocations, to the possibility of serious instability as South Korea and Japan seek to acquire preventive strike capabilities against DPRK WMD, to the undermining of US alliances with Japan and ROK as its defense commitments become suspect given developments in the DPRK as well as a retrenchment in US defense spending and finally, the danger of nuclear and other technology exports as well as growing ties between the DPRK, Iran and others.
- **Alliance Politics:** Over the past three years, the U.S. administration has followed the lead of a South Korean government driven by an ideology rather than national interest based approach to the DPRK. ROK policy is almost certain to shift after the upcoming South Korean election given the current views of the three leading candidates on North Korea policy. That could provide an opening for the formulation of a comprehensive strategy driven by a new South Korean government and accepted by the United States. One important caveat is the outcome of the U.S. election; a new Republican administration, populated by a mix of neoconservatives and realists, is unlikely to be sympathetic to any new approach. Even a second term Obama administration may be difficult to convince since it will probably view any shift as admitting that its first term approach was a failure.
- **Domestic Politics:** The Obama administration has concluded that it can secure “political rewards” through a “tough” approach towards North Korea. A shift towards a comprehensive approach will entail significant political risks without a guarantee of rewards. Part of that risk might be alleviated if the new approach is pursued in close collaboration with our allies. Additional fireproofing might be provided if the administration can point to other efforts in Northeast Asia (non-diplomatic) that bolster American and allied security. Part will also depend on the outcome of congressional elections; for example, with the same party in control of the White House and Congress, a policy shift may be more politically sustainable. Finally, since a majority of Americans see preventing North Korea from building its nuclear capabilities as a “very high priority” in Asia, tapping into that sentiment might also bolster support for a new comprehensive approach.

Normalization on Three Tracks

Based on past experience with the partial thaw beginning in the 1990s, normalization of US-DPRK relations will be a time consuming, difficult process that will require strong executive branch leadership, working closely with key allies and building domestic political support. In order to create forward momentum, normalization should be pursued on three tracks:

- **International agreements:** Replacing the armistice with an arrangement to end the state of war on the Korean peninsula will help resolve a number of differences and create momentum towards normalization. However, a critical consideration for the United States conditioning movement down the road of normalization will be the pace and scope of agreements dealing with Pyongyang's nuclear program which will have to move in tandem with the peace process. It is likely that even if the North were to agree quickly to denuclearize in the context of a comprehensive arrangement, given past experience, Washington would move slowly and cautiously towards normalization, each step forward depending on demonstrable progress in implementation. Nevertheless, such a process would begin to open more political space for the U.S. that would allow important progress in direct dealings with the DPRK, in turn reinforcing this momentum.
- **Government-to-government arrangements:** While there may be a number of steps the U.S. can take initially to signal a willingness to move towards normalization, Washington and Pyongyang should conclude a bilateral document laying out a path to reducing political, legal and economic barriers to normalization. The document would address steps to be taken by Washington, such as establishing diplomatic relations and easing any remaining trade restrictions, as well as by Pyongyang to deal with issues of concern to the United States including the problem of human rights that are outside the scope of the comprehensive agreement. Forward movement could create opportunities for the beginning of U.S. assistance programs in the North designed, for example, to facilitate food security, English language programs, and scientific exchanges. These might be supplemented and expanded as normalization gains momentum.
- **Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):** A third piece of the normalization effort, as the international and national components advance, the political space for NGOs to operate in the DPRK should grow, allowing them to also build greater cooperation between the North and the international community, an outcome that will in turn, reinforce the normalization process. Not only would progress open political space but it might also allow U.S. government financial support for NGOs operating programs with proven track records in the North, for example, in community development efforts addressing housing, food and energy needs.

