



Policy Forum 04-58A: North Korea: 2005 Outlook



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North Korea: 2005 Outlook

By Brent Choi

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I. Introduction

Brent Choi, a North Korea Specialist at the the Joongang Daily in the ROK, writes: "By the end of 2005 Kim [Jong-Il] must improve ties with the U.S. through resolving the nuclear crisis and induce Japanese capital to his state. At home he must re-organize his ruling party and establish a strong basis to revive its economy by promoting investment from Japan and other countries. But if Kim fails to address those problems in timely manner he will not only be heir-less but also under serious military threat from the outside. Time is definitely not on his side."

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II. Essay by Brent Choi

-"North Korea: 2005 Outlook"

by Brent Choi

My more than 10 years of experience as a North Korea journalist tells me we're not likely to see any interesting moves from the DPRK around this time of the year. From November to December the headquarters in Pyongyang where Kim Jong-il sits is rather engaged with the results of their policy for past 10 months and setting up new policy for next year. There are also some reshuffles in government posts as well. This essay is written in response to North Korea's likely steps in the future.

Foreign Policy

-Who will head North Korea's foreign policy for year 2005? The textbook answer points out the international division at the Rodong Party. However the head post of the international division has remained vacant for years. Therefore it's probably First Vice-Foreign Minister Kang Sok-ju, Foreign Vice-Minister Kim Gye-kwan and Secretary Kim Choong-il along with other key members wracking their brains over the next step. The early draft of Kang Sok-ju's foreign affairs policy would be reported to Kim Jong-il, the head of the state, sometime around December. The draft will be revised by the National Defense Commission and await the final approval from the head of the state. With the "okay" sign of Kim who is also the Chairman to the National Defense Commission, this draft will settle as the brand new policy for year 2005.

-A truly meaningful six-party talk is not likely to take place before January of next year at the earliest. This is because Pyongyang is keeping a close eye on Washington's change in both policy and personnel. Pyongyang is likely to decide after studying the U.S. stance reflected in various speeches and talks. The State of Union address and inauguration speech by President George W. Bush, as well as greetings from the East Asia and Pacific Affairs department of the State Department will serve that purpose. Even if a working-level talk takes place in preparation for the future six-party talks, the results would be nothing more than a simple gathering for photos if the occasion takes place before the coming January.

-China will be the biggest variable in relation to setting up a date for the six-way talks. If Beijing's pressure toward Pyongyang is strong enough the big talk could open by late January. If not, the talks could be delayed to after February. Again, Beijing could take advantage of the "Hu Jintao Card" to induce the North to the six-party table. Chairman Kim Jong-il, during his visit to China this April, invited Hu, the newly emerging President of China, to Pyongyang. If Chairman Kim refuses to come Beijing could "silently" imply that the Hu Jintao visit to Pyongyang could be cancelled.

-When the fourth six-way talks take place North Korea would use a comprehensive strategy that could save its face and secure gains at the same time. Outwardly, the North will insist that it was the U.S. hostile policy against its nation that started all the problems and Pyongyang is perfectly willing to resolve the U.S. concerns if the U.S. will do the same first. The North is also likely to make an issue out of unfairness of the IAEA for letting South Korea off the hook.

-Energy supply may be the biggest incentive to draw North Korea to the table. The country's situation turned from bad to worst with the suspension of heavy oil in December 2002. Hot water supply was not available in many places in the capital city. The frequent halt of trolley buses that move by electricity left passengers stranded on the middle of the road. The 500,000 tons of heavy oil the U.S. once provided annually used to make up 10 percent of the energy consumption in the country. The North would call for resumption of oil supply first and foremost, regardless of the

conclusion they reach in the talks.

-Don't listen to the U.S., see how they act first; this may be one thing North Korea understood in dealing with the U.S. since the clinching of 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework. In the North's perspective it is the U.S. that violated the Geneva Agreement. Thus the resumption of energy supply would become an important yardstick to determine the trustworthiness of the U.S. In this context the light water reactor project will rise as an obstacle, together with issue of verifying nuclear material in the North. Although the U.S. has long given up on the light water reactor project and the oil supply the North still remains hopeful. Washington might consider a kind of compromise such as replacing it with thermal plant coupled with 'some' oil supply but Pyeongyang is likely to demand more.

-Washington's various incentives to North Korea as revealed in the third six-party talks: security guarantee, removal from the U.S. terror list, economic support etc.,- are all fine. But Washington needs to foster a more favorable political environment to persuade the North.

-Even if the six-party talks turn out a success and an agreement is reached on the nuclear issue, there will be a possible conflict among Seoul, Washington and Tokyo. For example the U.S. might not want to be too involved in any specific incentives save some documents that assure the North's security. A more solid incentive such as oil and energy supply as well as other economic assistance would be discussed between the three countries and the issue of "burden-sharing" could flare up to a subtle diplomatic conflict among the three allies.

-During the six-party talks some of the hardliners in the North might plan on few threats / hints on the aftermath of re-processed nuclear materials, Daepodong Missile and related moves, training of the troops, intrusion into South Korean waters, etc. If the U.S. overreacts, Korean Peninsula would be caught up in psychological crisis in no time.

-One positive bit of news from North Korea observers is that Kim, the head of the North, may push ahead with several reform measures to revive the economy by next month. North Korea reshuffled its Rodong Party during the past three months from September to November. At the time the North's Cabinet in charge of the nation's economic policy has been complaining that Rodong Party members are interfering with the reform. It seems Chairman Kim has well heeded their complaints. Following the July 1st economic reform plan two years ago to loosen up the Ruling Party's control over the cabinet, Chairman Kim is most likely to empower the authority of the Cabinet administration next year.

-First Vice-Foreign Minister Kang might pose a delay tactic to gain as many incentives from Washington as possible. If that tactic lasts for a couple of weeks, that's fine. But if it lasts from few months to a whole year North Korea would definitely be in trouble. Washington is already armed with two issues against the totalitarian regime; PSI and human rights violation. If the North loiters around the six party talks the U.S. will use those two issues to strangle the North. North Korea's nuclear program will be presented at the UN Security Council.

-Kang must never forget that the only reason Pyeongyang has some time is because of Iraq. The U.S. has 140,000 troops deployed in Iraq and that's 35 percent of the total ground troops. There won't be enough U.S. troops if a crisis breaks out in the Korean Peninsula. That is why the U.S. has decided on a softer approach that is represented by the six-way talks. That won't be the case anymore by late January of next year after the general election in Iraq. Once a legitimate government is established in Iraq the U.S. troops stationed there would return home and the situation will simply worsen for Pyeongyang. If Pyeongyang truly wishes to make a good bargain out of its nuclear program they better act fast.

-One more thing Kang should bear in mind; the issue of Kim Jong-il's heir. Chairman Kim has relegated Jang Seong-thaek, his brother-in-law and the "second man to the throne" to a more leisurely post. There aren't many details to this event but it has something to do with the heir issue. Kim will turn 63 next year. Back in 1974 his father, Kim Il-sung named the present leader Kim as his heir. The then-leader Kim was 62 and the incumbent leader was 32 at the time. It's high time for Kim to choose his heir. If he wastes five or six more years not bothering to appoint a heir he is doomed to face a very unhappy future. Such a situation prompts Kim to make a big decision to improve ties with the United States. This calls for two special measures. By the end of 2005 Kim must improve ties with the U.S. through resolving the nuclear crisis and induce Japanese capital to his state. At home he must re-organize his ruling party and establish a strong basis to revive its economy by promoting investment from Japan and other countries. But if Kim fails to address those problems in timely manner he will not only be heir-less but also under serious military threat from the outside. Time is definitely not on his side.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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