

Policy Forum 08-052: Denuclearization and Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula are Possible



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By Wooksik Cheong

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I. Introduction

Wooksik Cheong, representative of Peace Network Korea, writes, "Eventually, "practically complete denuclearization" requires Bush's determination as much as Kim Jong-il's. Particularly, a DPRK-U.S. Summit is essential for a final agreement between the two nations. The most practical and symbolic way to show the end of hostile relations between the U.S. and DPRK is to create a scene of a firm handshake between Bush and Kim."

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II. Article by Wooksik Cheong

- "Denuclearization and Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula are Possible"

By Wooksik Cheong

The latter part of June 2008 deserves to be a historical moment that has achieved monumental accomplishments in denuclearization and the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) handed over a long-awaited declaration of its nuclear programs on June 26th. At the same time, the White House notified the U.S. Congress of its intent to remove the DPRK from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and lifted some trade sanctions against DPRK under the Trading with the Enemy Act. Moreover, the 60-foot-high cooling tower at North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear reactor, a symbol of North Korea's nuclear programs, was blasted on June 27th.

Since the sanctions under the Act were applied to North Korea in response to the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, North Korea had been adversely affected by the economic sanctions for 58 years. Also, North Korea had been listed as a state sponsor of terror for 20 years. Although various controversial issues in denuclearizing North Korea still remain, the declaration of North Korea's nuclear programs and the explosion of its cooling tower, historically unprecedented events, are a tangible progress toward denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Of course, it will be a long and tough journey toward total denuclearization. In order for complete denuclearization, North Korea must take steps to abandon its nuclear weapons and fissile materials as well as to dismantle its nuclear program. Yet, such steps are significant parts of DPRK's strategic decision-making. The controversial North Korea's uranium enrichment program and alleged DPRK-Syria nuclear cooperation would be obstacles to total denuclearization.

The strategic decision of U.S. is also important for complete denuclearization, because North Korea's final decision requires the end of hostilities between DPRK and the U.S. This include the resumption of the light-reactor project, replacement of the 1953 armistice treaty with Peace Treaty, normalization of DPRK-U.S. relations, reduction of ROK-U.S. joint military exercises, reduction of U.S. military readiness and powers against North Korea.

Then, is it possible to solve all the issues before President Bush leaves office in January 2009? Although the Bush administration acknowledged that complete denuclearization would be a extremely difficult task and process, the administration expressed its willingness to denuclearize DPRK. Nevertheless, the most of media and experts are pessimistic about total denuclearization.

They claim that since it would take several years to have North Korea denuclearize completely, the DPRK must cooperate in order to have the denuclearization to be completed, which is less likely to happen. Furthermore, they argue that it will be a long shot to complete the denuclearization process because the Bush administration has seven months left in its term. Accordingly, those pessimistic

experts suggest that "rather than lunge for a last-minute deal, the Bush administration should focus on laying a foundation for the next administration."

Still, there is a possibility that the Bush administration could solve a substantial portion of the problems within its term of office, if both states agree to verification of the amount of plutonium and carry out the verification process. There is no doubt that it is extremely difficult for both nations to agree on the accurate estimate of the size of a North Korean plutonium stockpile. There is approximately 10kg of differences between Washington's estimation and North Korea's declaration on the amount of plutonium. It is also very challenging to examine the difference technically and time-wise through verification. In other words, it indicates that it is possible to lead to "practically complete denuclearization" of North Korea during Bush's term in office, if six party talks find out the resolution of plutonium issue and negotiation both on verification and dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear programs spontaneously continue.

Given that all nuclear weapons and fissile materials are expected to be handed over, "practically complete denuclearization" of North Korea would be achieved or at least expedited by setting deadline for abandonment of nuclear programs on a date of handover. However, both nations should take mid- and long- term measures with respect to time-consuming and controversial issues of denuclearization such as the North Korea's uranium enrichment program and alleged DPRK-Syria nuclear cooperation.

Furthermore, the participants in the six-party talks must have intentions to take measures on the principle of "actions for actions" in exchange for North Korea's denuclearization. These participating nations including the U.S. should be willing to provide light-water reactor, to conclude peace treaty with North Korea, to normalize ties between the U.S.-North Korea, and to ease military readiness against North Korea. In short, strategic decisions of other nations are as important as North Korea's strategic decision in denuclearizing North Korea.

There are several grounds for the claim that the Bush administration could achieve practically complete denuclearization of North Korea. First, North Korea is more likely than not to consider domestic politics in the U.S., the weakened Bush administration and the Democratic-dominated U.S. Congress, as an advantageous condition to reach an agreement. It means that if conditions are met, DPRK has no reason to wait until the next administration.

Unlike the Clinton administration in 2000, the Bush administration has more discretion in negotiating with the DPRK because the Democratic Party in general supports the changed Bush's policy toward DPRK. Both Presidential candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain, must have realized that resolution in North Korean nuclear stalemate will lessen burden for the next administration.

Eventually, "practically complete denuclearization" requires Bush's determination as much as Kim Jong-il's. Particularly, a DPRK-U.S. Summit is essential for a final agreement between the two nations. The most practical and symbolic way to show the end of hostile relations between the U.S. and DPRK is to create a scene of a firm handshake between Bush and Kim. If President Bush will be able to visit Pyongyang and declare normalization of U.S.-DPRK relations, Kim may propose sending nuclear weapons and fissile materials on Bush's way back to the U.S.

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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