Dynamic Dance, Steady Landscape: Getting ready to negotiate with North Korea

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by Roger Cavazos

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I. INTRODUCTION

Roger Cavazos writes “China’s relationship is complex and richly interconnected with others in the region and the world…. The way China discusses the North Korea issue with many countries indicates that China may seek to change the international system at the margins, but has no interest in fundamentally changing the system. Nor does the U.S.”

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II. Policy Forum by Roger Cavazos

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We're watching the initial preparations for a diplomatic dance with North Korea play out via meetings at the most senior levels. The preparations, meetings and discussions also indicate that neither the U.S. nor China is ready to see the strategic landscape in Asia changed in a fundamental way. Yet.

China's Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Affairs was in Washington, D.C. earlier this week meeting with the U.S. State Department Special Envoy on North Korea. South Korea's Foreign Minister just finished a meeting with China's Foreign Minister. The triangular relationship and coordination is consistent with preparing positions and pre-arranging the steps of the delicate task of engaging North Korea in discussions. But those meetings only happened when there was top-level agreement to deal with the North Korean issue – always a difficult task.

Since Mid-March of this year, China's President has met with the U.S. Secretaries of State and Treasury (numbers four and five on the Presidential Succession list, respectively) as well as the Senior Uniformed officer of the United States the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. President Xi met as well with several U.S. leaders from government, business and academia while at the Bo'ao Forum. North Korea was discussed in each of those meetings.

The meetings where North Korea was discussed were not limited to U.S. only meetings. Australia's Prime Minister Gillard and President Xi agreed to have annual consultations. Only three other countries have such an arrangement with China, the United Kingdom, Germany and Russia. South Korea's Foreign Minister is visiting China as this was written and President Park plans to visit China shortly after her visit to the United States. Both U.S. allies are in Beijing to discuss several issues, and North Korea is once again on the list – but it is not the only issue.

The point is that China's relationship is complex and richly interconnected with others in the region and the world. China's relationship with others takes place within the broader rules and norms of a system that China finds very predictable and stable. The way China discusses the North Korea issue with many countries indicates that China may seek to change the international system at the margins, but has no interest in fundamentally changing the system. Nor does the U.S.

This broader acceptance of the rules sets is positive news for all. Even though the U.S. and Australia are treaty partners, neither one is threatened by a better Australia-China relationship. Almost all accept that there is no inherent contradiction that South Korea's largest trade partner is China while South Korea's security relationship and treaty ally is the United States. All parties should also be encouraged that DPRK issues are subsumed under various larger categories meaning that no one issue deadlocks progress on all the other issues. It is possible to move forward in some areas even as some areas are held back by thorny relations.

That North Korea is outside of all these activities argues for bringing North Korea into the system. And if North Korea prefers isolation, it is even more critical to bring them in since isolation tends to breed more isolation and make integration that much more painful and expensive.

In the near term, as the U.S., China, Korea and likely Japan and Russia dust off their Six Party Dance manual we will likely see more dress rehearsals before the dance begins in earnest.

III. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSES

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