
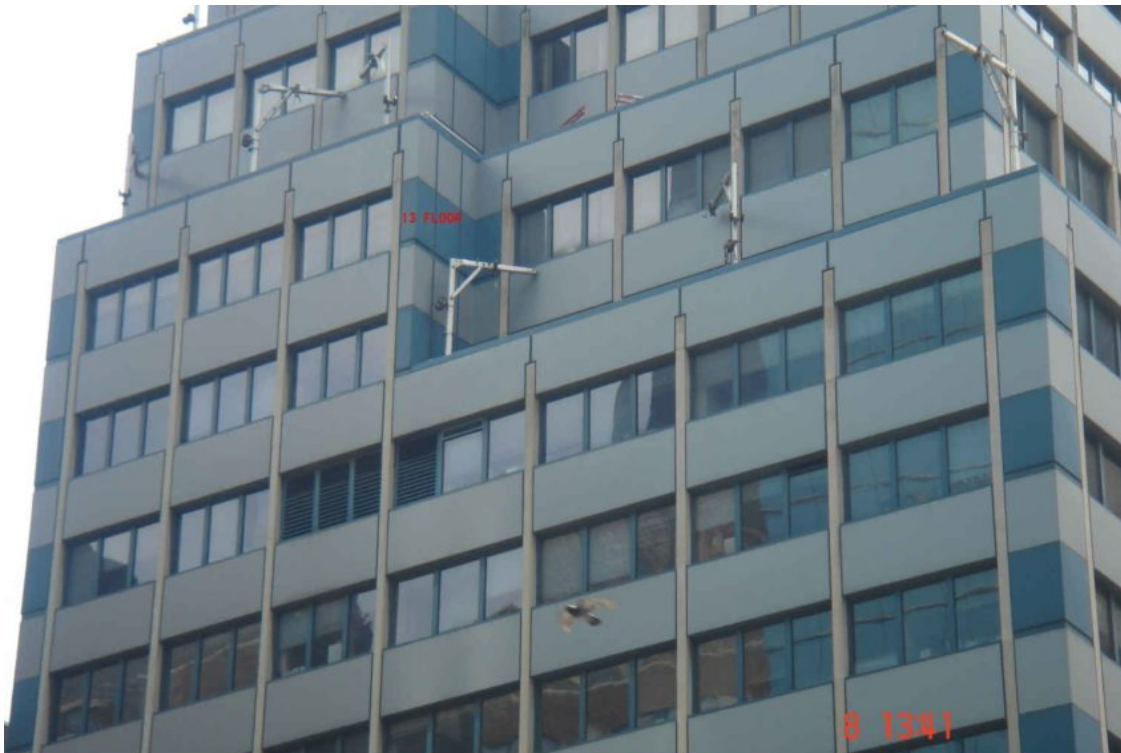


Policy Forum 11-31: Korea Talks Must Quickly Move From Tactics to Strategy

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Korea Talks Must Quickly Move From Tactics to Strategy

By Stephen Costello

September 20, 2011

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I. Introduction

Stephen Costello, an independent analyst and consultant, asserts that progress toward North Korean denuclearization will require far more work from the US. He writes, "If Washington is content to wait 18 months for a change of parties in Seoul before considering a return to broader, bolder engagement [with North Korea], then US policy rests on a fragile footing. Failure to lead now on these important issues will ensure no progress is made in the near term, and that bolder action will be more difficult in the future."

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Banner image: updated June 22 2018:

Banner image: DPRK UN Mission at 820 2nd Ave, New York, from [here](#).

II. Article by Stephen Costello

- "Korea Talks Must Quickly Move From Tactics to Strategy"

By Stephen Costello

The recent North-South Korean meeting in Bali and US-DPRK meetings in New York allow the

parties to appear to engage while temporarily reducing the threat of instability. Yet while the urgent political needs of the US and ROK administrations are tended, the strategic and longstanding needs of the DPRK and its neighbors—and therefore of the US—are unlikely to be addressed without a major reassessment of interests as well as a recalibration of strategic goals and political tactics by the United States. Washington's pledges that it has returned its attention to East Asia, while welcome, will fall short of expectations if the challenges presented by North Korea remain unaddressed and the party with the most abundant and useful leverage continues to stand on the diplomatic sidelines. What is the context for the meetings in Bali and New York, and what is at stake?

Chinese-North Korean Cooperation

The Chinese and North Koreans have reached new medium-term agreements, strengthening joint planning and opening the possibility for growing economic and infrastructure development across their border.[1] Even in the best case, this growing interdependence complicates considerations of deal-making for the denuclearization of the DPRK, because it reduces the incentive for the North to pursue development with South Korea. China's useful leverage—and strategic investments—from these joint projects has increased, while neglect of North-South cooperative projects has led simultaneously to a loss of leverage for South Korea. In the worst case, such cooperation could become the new norm for the DPRK, making its Chinese relationship sufficient to fend off deep, long overdue structural changes and integration with the international economic community indefinitely and dooming hopes for both denuclearization and North-South reconciliation.

The Russian Role

The Russian-North Korean relationship could be a useful part of a plan to achieve US goals, if it is linked to DPRK denuclearization and disarmament. The gas pipeline currently being promoted by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Kim Jong Il ought to be used to support the resumption of US-North Korean talks, rather than be dismissed out-of-hand. Leaders in Russia, China and North Korea (as well as many policy specialists in Japan and South Korea) will regard it as a sensible and positive plan, and as a symbolic reminder of the kind of infrastructure building that was an integral part of the 1994-2000 engagement effort. Russia's role in the effort to disarm and develop North Korea has been minimized and even denigrated during the past decade of relative disengagement by the US. However, Russian state interests in a pacified and economically developing North Korea significantly overlap those of all other parties, and the pipeline project could serve as leverage in support of those shared interests. If the Russians were able to launch this project in the current unpredictable environment it would surely be a bold gesture. Nevertheless, in this case, the South Korean role as the consumer of Russian gas is critical, so any progress will likely require leaders in Seoul to determine that political stability on the peninsula is growing and dependable. The Lee government is not likely to embrace this long-term project, since it depends on a degree of activism from both Washington and Seoul that is today out of the question. And since funding for such projects is based on predictions of political and economic stability years into the future, planners should take note of the recent secret disposal of Light Water Reactor (LWR) components in a Portsmouth, New Hampshire scrap yard, one of the lingering reminders of the failure to get engagement right ten years ago.[2]

North Korean Consistency

North Korean behavior has been predictable and remarkably consistent for over 15 years on the themes that matter to them: system survival and internal cohesion. Pyongyang's proposals for ending the Korean War, establishing better security relations with the United States, and joining the world economy (to at least some degree) have continued with little change. The DPRK view of the world, though nurtured in unparalleled isolation, makes sense from its point of view. The North Korean leadership's obsession with their US relationship is logical and strategically deft, because normal relations with Washington would at once lock in a channel to the country that helped South Korea achieve exceptionally rapid development, and allow greater protection against unwanted influence from China and Japan, both powerful enemies in the past. It also gives the US administration the great preponderance of useful leverage, among all other parties, to press for denuclearization and opening by the DPRK.

South Korean Loss of Influence

South Korean security policy, following a radical reversal in 2008, has erased much of the medium and long term network of strategic understandings pursued successfully by Presidents Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun. This network included the strengthening and evolution of the US-ROK alliance structure that was still underway through 2007. Between 1998 and 2008 the US and South Korea saw the SOFA and MTCR agreements of 2001, Korean troops to Iraq in 2004, base realignment of 2006, OPCON and KORUS-FTA agreements of 2007, and a healthy degree of new diplomatic independence for Seoul.

That independence allowed the South the flexibility to engage Japan, China, and North Korea independently from the United States, while pursuing greatly overlapping and complementary strategic goals. The new flexibility was used to upgrade and advance the strategic position of Seoul—and indirectly, of the United States—with South Korea's three immediate neighbors. Today the US-ROK alliance has shrunk to a pale shadow of the previous (ambitious) vision, with joint military and diplomatic demonstrations against DPRK actions serving as the main glue in the political relationship. While North-South relations are at a two-decade low, the South Korea-China relationship has also undergone significant decline in the past three years, largely powered by the inter-Korean issue.

Without government commitment to a practical peninsular vision, the joint North-South Industrial Complex at Gaesong endures with minimal support and without the expansion that would lead to economic viability. Abandonment of virtually all other development plans has reduced to a minimum Seoul's ability to shape the environment for DPRK choices.^[3] It may also reduce the ability of future ROK administrations to negotiate political and economic cooperative structures that would finally reflect the significant overlap of national interests on the peninsula and begin the process of broader peninsular integration. The next president will have a very high bar to clear if he/she is to convince South Korean and overseas companies and the North Koreans that development promises will be fulfilled. Both the 2000 and 2007 North-South summits produced plans that would have advanced integration, yet were unrealized due to failures of political leadership. Such integration—long before any *de jure* unification—would not only reflect deep national historical narratives in North and South Korea, it would change the power dynamics in the region in ways that could benefit all parties.

Today the South Korean administration is searching for leverage to avoid the perception—growing among Korean policy specialists and the media—that the disengagement gambit was a mistake.

Under enormous pressure from the ruling party, public opinion, and the US administration, modest food aid has been delivered to the DPRK. Leaders of President Lee's party have increasingly pressed for new efforts to restart North-South talks after the US administration had already secured such talks as a pre-condition for any new US-DPRK talks. Even current conservative party presidential front-runner Park Guen Hye argues vaguely in a new Foreign Affairs article that new efforts by the South are necessary to break the deadlock between the two Koreas.^[4] Korean opposition democrats are united in their view that the broad engagement vision pursued together with the United States from 1998 through 2000 remains the logical and practical path to peninsular, regional, and alliance security.

The presidential election, now 16 months away, will be close, and it is certain that policy toward the North, and regional strategy in general, will be part of the public debate. It is likely that the South Korean position will change in early 2013, allowing for more flexibility in North Korea policy, although the coherence and practicality of any new policy will depend upon the new administration. If Washington is content to wait 18 months for a change of parties in Seoul before considering a return to broader, bolder engagement, then US policy rests on a fragile footing. Failure to lead now on these important issues will ensure no progress is made in the near term, and that bolder action will be more difficult in the future.

US Interests Must Be Specified

In March this year, Senate Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry chaired a hearing on US policy toward North Korea. After testimony from government and NGO witnesses, Kerry observed, "Based on [widely differing testimony today], I get the sense that we are misinterpreting what our interests are, *vis a vis* [North Korea] and how they view us. And if we are, how useful are six party talks?"^[5] Kerry remains alone among policy leaders in questioning descriptions of US interests on Korea.

Those interests remain the subject of profound confusion among government officials, policy specialists, and the media. Critical decisions taken in the first weeks of the Obama administration continue to haunt both policy and process regarding Korea—and therefore the region as whole. Remarkably, there is no evidence that a serious policy review was ever undertaken following the failure of the previous administration's initiatives.^[6] The Bush administration's abrupt reversal of strategic and political understandings with North and South Korea in March 2001 led inevitably to peninsular and regional instability and the emergence of North Korea as a nascent nuclear state. Nevertheless, Obama administration statements since 2009 consistently reveal failures to understand the problem, assess leaders accurately, and identify US and shared interests. Due to this policy incoherence, three challenges stand in the way of progress going forward.

First, the ability of senior security and diplomatic officials to recalibrate policy and capture some of the US interests at stake is severely constrained by 30 months of bold, implausible statements from the President, cabinet members, and various senior officials. In April 2009, less than three months into the new administration, Zbigniew Brzezinski admitted feeling "discomfort" at the President's categorical statements about punishing North Korea during his Prague speech on nuclear policy.^[7] Since then, the drumbeat of such statements has continued while US interests were described in progressively counterproductive and unrealistic language. Phrases such as "buy the same horse twice," "go down the same road," "strategic patience," none of which accurately described either the positions of the parties or the interests of the US, have been substituted for policy. This language

has mainly served to avoid the questions at hand and shift blame for the impasse onto the DPRK and China. Certainly there is blame to be shared, particularly on the part of the North Koreans. It is nevertheless clear from the diplomatic history that only US efforts can make the critical difference in shaping the North's options.

Second, US diplomatic partners in the region have little reason to believe that Washington can sustain any engagement on these issues given the past decade of inconsistent diplomacy. The same can be said for views of the Seoul government. Extreme swings not only in policy but in fundamental strategic understandings, international agreements, and political commitments by the United States in 2001 and South Korea in 2008 have left behind a decade of doubt as to the allies' ability to assess interests or pursue strategic goals. While the mismatched ideologies and world views of the South Korean and US administrations have often made alliance coordination and American leadership more difficult, the application of a practical vision together with greater leadership could have forced progress. The experience of the past 20 years is full of examples of joint achievements by the US and ROK governments on these same issues and under difficult political circumstances.

Third, the fact of widely differing timelines and political needs between the authoritarian and democratic actors needs to be acknowledged. Time is not on the side of either the United States or South Korea. Both the North's WMD capabilities and the conditions of the DPRK population are cause for action. There are good reasons for the United States to be particularly impatient and proactive, neither of which ensures a weaker negotiating hand. The DPRK and China do not have the kind of political pressures felt by the US and ROK presidents, though they have others. The best analysis is that the post-Kim Jong Il leadership in the North—whenever it assumes authority—is unlikely to be as confident, flexible, cohesive, or invested in improved US-DPRK relations as is the current group. The North's increasing reliance on China has eroded the leverage of South Korea in particular, in ways that will make eventual North-South reconciliation more difficult. The net result is that a policy of delay is not in the interest of the United States or South Korea. This fact is belatedly becoming more widely understood in Seoul.

Agreements Based on Shared Interests

If the current exploratory talks are to go beyond incremental and insufficient gestures, the discussions first between the United States and South Korea, then with China and North Korea, must become more strategic and focus on the overlapping interests of the countries participating in the Six Party Talks.

These countries share broad interests in seriously addressing the North Korea challenge:

- Lowering tension in the East Sea, and raise the prospect for tension-reduction agreements.
- Eliminating a major irritant in the US-China relationship. An economically developing, disarming, and more secure North Korea, interacting with other countries and international institutions, is a more valuable neighbor to China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea.
- Reducing the WMD threat from the North in the near and medium term (and eventual elimination in the long term) to lessen one of the main drivers of the current region-wide arms race, and to reduce the arms expenditures of all parties. A diminished threat profile for US forces on Korea and Japan, allowing greater force structure flexibility in both countries. (See the Webb/McCain letter of March 2011 arguing against an expanded military footprint.[\[8\]](#))

- Facilitating North-South rapprochement, including a new economic/development focus in the DPRK.
- Easing Japanese insecurity, and focusing greater attention to economic and infrastructure development.
- Identifying major new possibilities for cooperation between the US and regional parties.
- Expanding commercial activity along North Korea's borders, including enhanced rationale for a Russia-ROK gas pipeline and Europe-Russia-China-ROK-Japan "Iron Silk Road."

Sequencing of diplomacy and symbolism will be critical, as will public commitments by the United States and its partners to near, medium, and end states. Without this return to a long-term strategic context, it will be impossible for the United States to be flexible enough to make progress. And without new and sincere public pledges it will be impossible to begin to build the minimum level of trust among parties necessary for action. US negotiators will have to keep their primary focus on reducing and eventually eliminating the WMD and missile threats posed by the DPRK, while at the same time recognizing that success will come only in proportion to real security and economic development inputs on the ground led by Washington. Direct US financial contributions need not be significant; rather, diplomatic and management skills, and the ability to organize and leverage UN and NGO community resources will be in greatest demand. Parallel to these primary goals, supplemental and urgent issues including dangerous illicit activities and human rights must be folded into near-term timelines.

Moreover, the US administration is not weak in its diplomatic personnel tasked to Asia. This team, which includes Kurt Campbell as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Stephen Bosworth as Special Representative for North Korea Policy, will likely be joined by Wendy Sherman as Undersecretary for Political Affairs and Sung Kim as Ambassador to Korea (assuming confirmation). It has the necessary heft and experience to get the job done. Presumably, internal hurdles to performing a top-to-bottom review of interests, goals, strategy, and policy are further up the chain of command. If that is the case, those hurdles will have to be jumped.

If negotiations are to succeed, we should avoid organizational straight-jackets that emphasize process over results. The Six Party Talks may have continued utility, if only as the one forum where all the main parties can sit at the same table together. But the multilateral diplomacy of 1994-2000 showed the willingness of North Korea's neighbors and others to contribute to a broad solution to its security and development challenges given their own interests. While addressing different issues may require different bilateral and multilateral fora, US-ROK coordination will remain crucial. China, Russia and Japan will need to be consulted closely and will remain ready to support diplomacy and deals based on their perceived interests and desire to secure diplomatic and commercial opportunities. Others, such as the EU and Australia, may also remain ready to contribute. Use of UN resources and authorities should be maximized, both to spur momentum and to relieve the US of as much management responsibility as possible. Similarly, IMF and World Bank technical advice and guidance should be brought to bear at the earliest time, so that eventual flows of significant aid can be realistically planned and matched to the DPRK's realistic ability to absorb it.

Today's Choices Have Consequences

The more urgent political needs of the United States and South Korea can be met as long as

sufficient imagination, planning and leadership are brought to bear on North Korea and China. The kind of robust engagement that will produce results will have a loud chorus of critics in both Seoul and Washington. Yet the case for the current posture has always been extremely fragile, and built largely on myths, misunderstandings, and overwrought fears. Furthermore, the current posture has been counterproductive. A government that can perceive its interests and produce a practical plan for action can certainly make a strong argument for that plan. This is true in both the Blue House and the White House, where even small gains from productive diplomacy would stand up well against critics in the political realm.

However, if the current timid, narrow, and politically-constrained posture persists, then the Korea challenge will grow well beyond current concerns over who will get the blame for the greatest foreign security policy blunder of this US administration. Nothing in today's news reports or anonymous officials' statements from Seoul or Washington is likely to prevent a return to provocations or demonstrations by North Korea and its continued march towards becoming a greater regional nuclear threat. The window for making progress is likely not very wide. The DPRK has gone from being on the cusp of meaningful development and security advances in 2000 to losing its hoped-for primary partner in development and security in 2001 and its secondary partner in 2008, all the while wallowing in continued poverty and isolation. Now the North Korean leadership relies largely on China, and to a lesser degree on Russia, with little hope for a return to the promise of 2000. In this situation the halfhearted and narrowly prescribed initiatives by Seoul and Washington are unlikely to alter DPRK expectations. Acts deemed provocative by the United States and South Korea will surely reemerge before long. As long as the focus of diplomacy remains primarily symbolic and political, neither South Korea or the United States will be in any better position to react to such acts than they were two years ago.

Without a bolder and more strategic approach by the United States, perhaps only the return of a pro-engagement leadership in South Korea would provide a route back to the regional tension-reduction and post-Cold War architecture-building so many have struggled to erect for so long. Even in that case, it is not certain the US administration would have the stomach (or wisdom) to take a chance on new initiatives. But due to the "lost decade" of ideological and wrong-headed posturing, first by Washington and then by Seoul, and North Korea's continued dangerous behavior nothing short of boldness, clear strategic thinking, and grown-up language will lead to increased security and development in Korea and Northeast Asia.

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[2] "Westinghouse, which has a facility located in Newington, was the original manufacturer of the components. The parts were eventually sold to KEPCO, which recently decided to scrap the components, said Shaw." Charles McMahan, "Reactor parts secretly scrapped; Had originally been intended for North Korea nuke facility," July 17, 2011, <http://www.seacoastonline.com/articles/20110717-NEWS-107170329>.

[3] “A better approach is moderate pragmatism—to coin a phrase—and empirical investigation. On that basis, I fail to see how anyone could conceivably claim Lee Myung Bak’s policy on North Korea is superior to the sunshine approach. On no criteria is the peninsula in a better place now, much less a safer one, than it was three years ago. Surely this is a plain and simple fact. (The parallel with U.S. policy as between the Clinton and George W. Bush eras is striking.)” Aidan Foster-Carter, “Scrapping the Second Summit: Lee Myung Bak’s Fateful Mis-step,” www.38north.org , 20 January 2011.

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<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68136/park-geun-hye/a-new-kind-of-korea>.

[5] US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 1 March 2011, “Breaking the Cycle of North Korea Provocations.” See full video here:
<http://foreign.senate.gov/hearings/hearing/?id=e85bfd8f-5056-a032-528b-0969fbfd6ecc>.

[6] “A review, carried out by the Obama administration during its first month in office, concluded that North Korea had no intention of trading away what it calls its “nuclear deterrent” in return for food, fuel and security guarantees. Mr. Obama’s aides have said that while the new president is willing to re-engage in either the talks with North Korea and its neighbors, or in direct bilateral discussions, he will not agree to an incremental dismantlement of the North’s nuclear facilities.” David Sanger, “U.S. to Confront, Not Board, North Korean Ships,” New York Times, 16 June 2009.

[7] Charlie Rose, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, The Charlie Rose Show, 9 April 2009:

“My sense from talking to the Chinese is that their position is: Be patient. Take it easy. Don’t push the envelope. Don’t force the pace. Don’t produce an explosion in North Korea which can then engulf the entire peninsula. Because our interests will be affected first, say the Chinese. And we have to take that into account. And that, as a consequence, imposes a limit on what we can do.

“The one aspect of what was said recently in Europe by President Obama that gives me a little bit of discomfort is his very, very categorical statement that there has to be some form of punishment for what the North Koreans did. Because it will be very difficult, I think, to reach a real consensus, with some bite, regarding what that punishment ought to be. And I think there is a lesson in that. If we are going to be working with partners in dealing with a problem then we have to be patient until we have a joint, a truly joint position with our partners.”

Charlie Rose: A review of President Obama’s trip to Europe with Zbigniew Brzezinski & Henry Kissinger, Monday, April 6, 2009, <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/10202>.

[8] Senator Jim Webb, “Observations and Recommendations on U.S. Military Basing in East Asia,” May 2011,
http://webb.senate.gov/issuesandlegislation/foreignpolicy/Observations_basing_east_asia.cfm

IV. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@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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