

Policy Forum 03-41A: Whither the Coast of Salvation: Navigating Troubled Waters in Northeast Asia Amidst North Korean Nuclear Crisis



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Whither the Coast of Salvation: Navigating Troubled Waters

in Northeast Asia Amidst North Korean Nuclear Crisis

by Alexandre Y. Mansourov

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I. Introduction

Alexandre Y. Mansourov argues that the international community has a rare historical opportunity to use the six-party talks in Beijing not just to settle old scores and pin down old enemies, but to advance the cause of Korean unification thereby finally resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis, reuniting two Koreas in a peaceful and democratic manner, and bringing better governance and economic prosperity to the North Korean people. He believes the Beijing process may well become "the contrarian's dream come true," surprise everyone, and turn out to be much more productive, far-reaching, and momentous than any previous talks on the North Korean nuclear problem.

The views expressed in this article are personal opinions of the author and do not reflect the official positions of the APCSS or the U.S. government. Nor do they necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute.

II. Essay by Alexandre Y. Mansourov

"Whither the Coast of Salvation: Navigating Troubled Waters in Northeast Asia Amidst North Korean Nuclear Crisis"

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Kim Jong Il's Dilemma

On the eve of the much anticipated six-party talks in Beijing on August 27-29, 2003, the Dear Leader knows very well that his monarchy is slowly disintegrating, his people are disappointed, frustrated, angry, and hopeless, and that only power matters. Signs of profound domestic crisis and fin de siècle atmosphere similar to the last years of the dying Chosun dynasty in the early 1900s are everywhere in North Korea. His half-hearted attempts to reform the system keep faltering because of the lack of genuine political will and leadership at home and growing international isolation abroad. But, the worst of all is the fact that "Barbarians are at the Gate:" the "ugly Americans" knock at all the closed doors of his hermit kingdom in 2003 with the same blind determination as the "unscrupulous Japanese" did back in 1903 before the colonial takeover in 1905.

What seems to be on Kim Jong Il's mind now? The first public release in early August 2003 of a joint venture DPRK-Russian feature film called "The Coast of Salvation," most likely directed personally

by Kim Jong Il, offers a glimpse at Kim Jong Il's worries and thinking about his preferred ways to rebuff the mounting international pressure. The movie script depicts four Russian shipwreck sailors and a Russian Orthodox priest, whose battleship "Svetlana" had been sunk by the Japanese flotilla in 1905, who made it safely to the shores of Korea and, after a few cultural misunderstandings provoked by the Japanese plotting, helped innocent Korean peasants, defend ancient royal tombs against invading cunning Japanese marauders.

It is obvious that the big question for Kim Jong Il is who may help North Koreans defend their ancestors' tombs, namely Kim Il Sung's grave, against American tomb raiders. Kim Jong Il's dilemma seems to be whether he should count on a renewed friendship with a weakened and mistrustful Russia already defeated by the United States in the Cold War or whether he should welcome a rather whimsical "white knight" from the South (the same Korean blood, albeit a strange bedfellow of his chief nemesis - the United States) and reluctantly concede to some degree of South Korean "protectorate" in order to deflect the mounting American pressure. In other words, when "barbarians" decide to break through the gates, to which way should he flee to find salvation - to the north or to the south?

Two Pessimistic Scenarios

The international community is faced with a difficult dilemma of its own at the six-party crisis resolution process in Beijing. Namely, will the global hegemon (the United States), aligned with three great powers (China, Japan, and Russia) and a rising regional middle power (ROK), be able to gang up on a recalcitrant small power (a weak, hungry, and declining DPRK) in order to convince or coerce the latter to disarm and change its internal policies and external behavior in accordance with its wishes?

It is interesting to note that on the eve of the three-party talks between the United States, DPRK, and PRC in Beijing in April 2003, many analysts tended to be excessively optimistic and proved to be disappointed. In contrast, on the eve of the six-party talks in August 2003, while all negotiation participants are jockeying for a stronger bargaining position before the official opening of the talks, exchanging veiled threats and counter-threats, putting pressure on their perceived allies and partners, drawing the red lines, and pledging their future commitments upfront in public to make them sound more credible and persuasive, most of the observers rush to express their pessimism and gloom-and-doom predictions about the future of the talks.

At best, these realist thinkers foresee a troublesome continuation of the existing status-quo, shaken up sporadically by emotional walk-outs by some representatives demanding sincerity, simultaneity of action, trust for nothing, eternal love, and so on. The status-quo may be occasionally adjusted at the margins during the on-again, off-again rounds of six-party plenary sessions devoted to the fruitless debates about the virtues, flaws, costs, benefits, and credibility of something like Agreed Framework Light or Very Light, or Agreed Framework Two (stipulating North Korean nuclear disarmament in exchange for multilateral security guarantees and international economic assistance), or Agreement to Disagree, etc. Such talks are likely to head slowly but inevitably towards unannounced death like the notorious four-party peace talks of the 1997-1999.

At worst, they predict a "gangbang"-type outcome for the Beijing six-party talks. In particular, these talks are believed to be a venue for both Washington and Pyongyang to buy time for further advancement of their respective "sinister aggressive plans" vis-à-vis each other and an opportunity to de-legitimize their respective opponent in the eyes of the international community of nations: "See, we told you so... We tried to bend over time and again, but they just refused to listen and

compromise..." At the end of the day, they expect that the United States is likely to succeed in fully de-legitimizing the North Korean regime in front of other participants and especially its former communist allies. Consequently, Washington should be able to form an ad hoc multilateral anti-DPRK coercive coalition of the "intimidated" (ROK and PRC), "the weak" (Russia), and "the greedy" (Japan) and may attempt to bring down the North Korean regime by intensifying blockade, increasing international pressure, and through the use of force, if necessary, thereby resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis once and for all.

Two Positive Visions

Although I am tempted to go back to my traditional realist roots in pondering over the prospects for the six-party talks and join the almost unanimous chorus of pessimistic and rather destructive Cassandra voices, especially because if there is any place on earth where hard-core realism rules, it is the Korean peninsula, I would like to outline two possible idealist visions for their outcome to make them a historic success. The countdown is on, but the talks have not begun yet. So, now it is a propitious moment to entertain our dreams and strive to move and shape the reality in accordance with our wishes, since we do not know yet what is held in store for us in future. Once the six-party talks go into full swing and the veil of inscrutable mystique is lifted, the currently unknowable will become the painfully knowable, the mundane reality of tough bargaining will take over our imagination, and there will be no place for wishful thinking anymore.

Thus, here are two idealist visions of the Beijing process for the statesmen to ponder over during the last lull before the storm. The first vision of where the six-party conflict resolution process could be taken will preserve the North Korean sovereignty, albeit much transformed and institutionally constrained, while creating new multilateral security architecture in Northeast Asia. The second vision will eventually eliminate the North Korean statehood and all problems associated with it in a peaceful and democratic manner, while generating a major geopolitical shift and creating a new geopolitical player in the region.

First, if our goal is denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, credible assurances of mutual non-aggression and confidence-building measures across the DMZ, and better governance based on democratic values and free markets in Northeast Asia, the six nations participating in the Beijing talks can sign a rather simple basic Northeast Asia Treaty embodying these fundamental principles and assurances and set up a six-party organization, Northeast Asian Treaty Organization (NEATO), to monitor and verify the member-states' adherence to their treaty obligations, to negotiate and to implement the enabling agreements.

What come to mind are the origins of NATO and its relationship with the then enemy-state, West Germany, in the early 1950s. Half a century ago, NATO alliance was very different from what it is today. Its original goal was "to keep Germany down, America in, and Russia out of Western Europe." As time went by, NATO succeeded in eradicating the centuries old French-German animosity, mutual insecurity and hostility. More importantly, NATO proved to be one of the most efficient organizational frameworks within which the Western allies successfully pushed for the "regime change" in West Germany, the so-called 4D-program, namely demilitarization, democratization, denazification, and deregulation. Obviously, Northeast Asia is not Europe. This notwithstanding, some lessons of multilateral conflict resolution in Europe and the experience of NATO formation and evolution may be applicable to some extent on the Korean peninsula, as well.

For instance, the Beijing process can offer a diplomatic venue for creating a multilateral regional security architecture that will eventually reduce mutual insecurities and threat perceptions, and,

hence, will facilitate the dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear program, as well as will promote better governance, transparency, and stability in Northeast Asia. The NEATO's collective mutual non-aggression provision can eliminate the need to provide bilateral security guarantees, so much opposed by Washington, and can relieve Pyongyang's insecurity about the U.S. nuclear threat. As time goes by, internal institution-building processes within NEATO can do away with the armistice agreement and DMZ dividing the Korean peninsula like the NATO did away with the line of Magino separating France from Germany. The NEATO can incorporate KEDO's functions in terms of verifying the freeze and dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear program and can facilitate the member-states' cooperative efforts aimed at improving the energy situation in the North. Although the DPRK's statehood and sovereignty will be preserved, the NEATO's commitment to better governance can eventually facilitate the North Korean transition to democratic rule and free markets, like the NATO's policies did in Europe for half a century. Since one of the geopolitical goals of NEATO could be "to keep North Korea down, America in, and China out of the Korean peninsula," in the end, the United States will stay engaged in the Korean peninsula for a long time, China's rising influence in Korean affairs will be checkmated, and the DPRK's domestic and international behavior will be constructively modified, improved, and civilized.

Second, an alternative vision for the Beijing process, preferred by this author, is "two plus four" formula advancing Korean unification process, whereby two Koreas will take the lead in deciding internal institutional aspects of unification and four great powers will play supportive roles in resolving external concerns and providing security assurances for peaceful transition. Think about the year of 1989 and the "two plus four" multilateral talks on the resolution of the German problem in Berlin (including East Germany, West Germany, the United States, USSR, France, and Great Britain). At that time, despite President Reagan's impassionate plea to the Soviet leader Gorbachev to "tear down that Wall" in 1985, Washington, still preoccupied with the Cold War confrontation with Moscow, was primarily worried about the future of 300,000 Soviet troops forward-deployed in East Germany. This notwithstanding, the West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl looked at the collapsing communist regime in East Berlin and tremendous popular exodus from East Germany and decided to fundamentally change the substance and course of the then six-party security talks. He displayed decisive and determined leadership and essentially hijacked the "two plus four" formula by single-handedly making the six-party talks the discussion forum about the modalities, speed, and shape of German unification, as well as provision of assurances of external support for a unified German state.

In the same vein, although many people believe that the Korean problem writ large can be finally resolved only through ultimate Korean unification by peaceful means on a democratic basis, few expect that it will be done any time soon. Moreover, some influential voices in many regional capitals even suggest that unification must be postponed indefinitely. But, in politics like in investing, timing is everything. Perhaps, the six-party negotiation process in Beijing should be redirected to advance the cause of Korean unification in general. For, once Korea is unified under the leadership of democratic capitalist Republic of Korea, there will be no need for unilateral nuclear disarmament by North Korea or regime change in Pyongyang. The re-orientation of the six-party negotiations in Beijing along the lines of the "two plus four" Berlin-style formula with the purpose of the overall settlement of the Korean problem can ensure that the four great powers surrounding the Korean peninsula (United States, China, Russia, and Japan) will provide necessary assistance to South and North Korea in their drive to reconcile and unify the peninsula by peaceful means, including economic development aid and humanitarian assistance to the northern half of Korea, provided that an emerging unified Korean state will eliminate human rights abuses and institute democratic rule throughout the peninsula, reduce dramatically its conventional armed forces, and verifiably abolish its WMD programs, especially the DPRK's nuclear weapons program.

Time to Lead is Now

The two positive visions for the future of the six-party talks proposed above are controversial and may not be even original. I am sure they will generate a lot of opposition and criticisms, some of substance and some of nit-picking nature. But, with the initiation of the six-party negotiation process, we now have a multilateral process, the Beijing process, involving all regional parties concerned and rather strong political will to find a diplomatic solution to the Korean problem in all six capitals of Northeast Asia. Time to make a "bold initiative" and act decisively is now. Let us not waste this opportunity for petty squabbling and temporary palliative cures.

It is very encouraging that the North Korean government representatives speaking about the future of the six-party talks like to cite the proverb "although dogs bark, the caravan is bound to go ahead." Some observers predict that the Beijing talks will be just the first step on the long road towards final resolution of the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula. Perhaps so, especially if one believes that timing is on his side. But, one should keep in mind the Korean proverb saying, "a long dream predicts an unlucky thing." In other words, final resolution must not be delayed if one wants to avoid failure.

An old Russian adage says, "only fool blames the other person; a smart person blames himself; and the wise person blames no one." If all participants keep an open mind and use creative thinking, the six-party talks may well surprise everyone and turn out to be much more productive, far-reaching, and momentous than anything in the past. But, for the six-party talks to succeed, the United States and Republic of Korea must display genuine foresighted leadership and push the negotiation process towards their ultimate vision of the united democratic capitalist Korean peninsula free from weapons of mass destruction and at peace with its neighbors without delay, for "where the head goose flies, the flock will ultimately follow."

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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