

Policy Forum 09-058: North Korea Entering a New Phase: 'We Are Not Interested in the U.S. Anymore'



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North Korea Entering a New Phase: 'We Are Not Interested in the U.S. Anymore'

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By Amii Abe

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I. Introduction

Amii Abe, Visiting Fellow at the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, writes, "In summation, though North Korea has strong suspicions against the U.S. and has lost the enthusiasm to negotiate with Washington, they still need to talk with the U.S. at the end of the day... First of all, we need to pay attention not only to Kim Jong-Il or the next successor, but also to the hard-liners who affect decision-making in North Korea... Secondly, imposing new sanctions is necessary, but is not enough... to change the situation, the U.S. needs more fundamental action than ever before; to deal with the DPRK's focus on the legacy of the Korean War."

II. Article by Amii Abe

- "North Korea Entering a New Phase: 'We Are Not Interested in the U.S. Anymore'"
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Introduction

Six days before the DPRK conducted their recent second nuclear test, an official of the DPRK government strongly declared, "We are expanding. We will conduct nuclear tests and missile tests again, and sell our nuclear arms to other countries to achieve equal power with the U.S."

As long as we understand North Korea's perspective, their provocative actions are not surprising. Rather, all of them are foreseeable. The government of the DPRK has already reached a new stage in their foreign policy strategy, which is a marked departure from their past observed strategies.

Message from the DPRK

In the middle of May 2009, I spent four days in Pyongyang with a 60+ year old official who was deeply involved in decision-making regarding DPRK international diplomacy. This was my second time meeting him, the first being in May 2008. As was required during our first meeting, due to extreme secrecy surrounding his identity, on this visit he also did not allow me to take his picture.

During our conversations, there were four reactions towards America which he clearly demonstrated. First, he strongly remarked that the DPRK didn't hope or intend to hold bilateral talks with the U.S. He denied the idea that the DPRK fired a "satellite" in April 2009 to get attention from the U.S., and stated "We do what we need to do by ourselves. We are not interested in the U.S. There is no advantage for us to talk with them. Please leave us alone." Secondly, he mentioned that as long as there were heightened tensions between Pyongyang and Washington that North Korea will continue to increase its military capabilities in three ways: 1) continue to launch rockets, 2) develop its nuclear arms capabilities, and 3) sell its nuclear weapons to other countries. Third, he demonstrated one hundred percent confidence that Washington would approach Pyongyang for future talks. He said, "I have confidence. Even if the U.S. ignores or criticizes us now, they will finally come to talk with us." This implies, however, that though North Korea is not interested in talking with the U.S. "now," they still consider bilateral talks with the U.S. to be "finally" very necessary for them. Lastly, although he advocated a very assertive and aggressive policy, he also hinted that the DPRK was still very afraid of the U.S.

This report focuses on the North Korean intentions and perspective towards the U.S.; including surprising boldness, an interest for continued diplomacy and fear, all originating in whole, or in part, from the lasting legacy of the Korean War.

Not Interested In the U.S. "Anymore"

The official I met with used an interesting word when he talked about his government's indifference to the U.S.: "anymore." He clearly said that the DPRK was no longer interested in negotiation with the U.S. The word "anymore" implies that North Korea once had a motivation to talk with the U.S. but lost it for some variety of reasons, and then decided to move forward in a new way, which is in contrast to their past strategy.

According to the official, North Korea has had a distrust of America, increasing little by little over the last few years. Specifically, he cited three issues which have elevated their distrust. First, the U.S. delayed cancelling the sanctions on Banco Delta Asia, a bank used by the government for laundering money. Second, the U.S. delayed delisting North Korea from its State Sponsors of Terrorism list. Then finally, the U.S. tried to modify the nuclear inspection area from Yongbyon to numerous other suspected facilities. These issues further strained an already tense relationship between the DPRK and the U.S., further exacerbating the DPRK's mistrust towards the U.S. It goes without saying that those viewpoints are different from the U.S. understanding, however, there is also the fact that the official seemed to have deepened his suspicion and doubt towards the U.S., as compared to the views he had expressed to me only one year prior [1] when he stressed his interest in improving the DPRK's relationship with Washington.

The issue of the extreme distrust by North Korea towards the U.S. is an interesting matter. The impressions I gleaned through the conversation with the official was that this very basic mind-set has existed inside the DPRK since the Korean War. From the North Korean perspective, the U.S. continuously unilaterally requires disarmament of North Korea's armed forces, although they support military assistance to South Korea [2] and protect them under the so-called "nuclear umbrella." [3] Because of this perceived contradiction, North Korea tends to think that the U.S. will never genuinely embark upon improved relations, even if Washington uses "friendly" rhetoric towards the DPRK.

After all, North Korea is bound by a spell of memory from the Korean War. It has been 56 years since that devastating war, but the U.S. and North Korea are still suspended under a cease-fire and permanent peace has not been achieved. During this period, the U.S. was very busy dealing with many other international and domestic issues, making it impossible to strictly focus on DPRK topics. On the other hand, Pyongyang had far more "time on its hands" and was paying near-exclusive attention to Washington. Given this, and the fact that the war with the U.S. is still not formally over, the DPRK has a strong fear that the tragedy of the Korean War may happen again. In fact, that official talked so often about the war that it surprised me. I felt that their hostility and suspicion towards America were still very strong; much more than I had expected.

Proliferation Is Inevitable

The DPRK official definitively stated that North Korea was eager to increase their military power by performing nuclear tests, rocket tests [4] and proliferating nuclear weapons through sales to other countries. All of these plans are made with the intention of opposing the U.S., in an attempt to shift the balance of power away from America.

The reasons why the DPRK seeks to have nuclear weapons are interesting. As the DPRK repeatedly announced to several foreign countries in the past, [5] the official also explained that their final goal was to achieve denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, which was the late Kim Il-sung's instruction. Under North Korea's interpretation, denuclearization will require both North and South Korea to relinquish their nuclear weapons. This implies that South Korea should ultimately give up on its reliance on the U.S. nuclear umbrella. To reach this goal, first and foremost, North Korea feels that it has to be a nuclear power of equal standing with South Korea and the U.S.

At one point during our meeting, I said to the official, "Your idea to spread your weapons is contradictory to Kim Il-sung's ideal to accomplish denuclearization." He answered, "I know that the proliferation of nuclear weapons is dangerous for the world. But there is the fact that the U.S. already threatens us with their nuclear weapons, so we need to weaken their power first. If we spread our nuclear arms to other countries like Africa, [6] the power of the U.S.'s weapons would be relatively decreased. Once the U.S. is not able to be predominant over others, then we can be on equal footing and it will be possible to move to the next step; to ultimately give up our nuclear program altogether."

In some ways, the official I met with was grateful to the U.S., as Washington often gives plenty of time to North Korea to improve their armed forces, by using rhetoric like "North Korea failed their test," [7] "this is typical brinksmanship of North Korea," [8] and so on. These understandings lead to a tentative U.S. policy decision, which is ultimately "deal with North Korea later". The official compared the power differential between North Korea and the U.S. by stating, "Fifty years ago, America was a university student, and we were a kindergartener. Now, America is a university student, and we are a vocational college student." Then he continued, "We are expanding. Time is always turning to our advantage. From now, we are going to sell our nuclear arms to countries which hate the U.S. If the U.S. goes to war against us because of our action, we will not miss this chance to attack the South to unify Korea."

Their extremely strong feeling toward the U.S. leads them to take a firm stance against Washington. However, if we set back the clock a few months, an important fact is clear: North Korea had not yet established their aggressive position against the U.S.

In January 2009, there were two schools of thought within the North Korean government with regards to the "satellite" launch which was planned to be conducted in a few months' time. One side opposed the plan and insisted that the "U.S. is opening their door to us, so we shouldn't conduct the test and should try to make a deal with them." The other side, however, stressed that "Even if the U.S. seems to have tolerance for the DPRK, they are still fundamentally looking down at us. As long as they are despising us, we can't get anything." Also, the DPRK had a flexible approach about how to deal with the U.S. special envoy Stephen Bosworth. At that time, they had considered meeting him in Pyongyang to hold bilateral talks with the U.S. through him. However, Pyongyang chose to fire the "satellite" on April 5, 2009 and ultimately refused Bosworth entry into North Korea. Through this context, we can see that the ideas of hard-liners within the DPRK government are given first preference over the ones of the moderates, and the hard-liner's influence has been increasing. This doesn't, however, mean that North Korea is just controlled by the hard-liners or that they are simply heading down the path to become a dangerous warlike nation.

Bilateral Talks Are the Ultimate Goal

Through the experience of spending four days with the official, I also found that North Korea still believes that, in the end, they can achieve bilateral talks with the U.S. on an equal footing.

With regard to the Obama Administration, the official predicted that President Obama might take the same line as did President Bush. This means that the U.S. would take a firm stance against North Korea at first. However, the more they adopt a hard line by imposing sanctions or simply ignoring Pyongyang and refusing direct engagement, as President Bush did, the more North Korea achieves time to improve their armed forces. Because of this predicted outcome, it was the official's opinion that the Obama Administration will finally approach the DPRK for bilateral or multilateral talks, as President Bush did. Though this may be unpleasant for Americans to hear, it can also be seen that North Korea's goal is still, ultimately, negotiations with the U.S. To my knowledge, the DPRK hasn't established a goal to go to war against America. This connects to the last point, that

though North Korea shows a strong stance, they are still afraid of the U.S.

"Will the U.S Really Attack Us?"

After an extended conversation with the DPRK official, he suddenly became quiet, then asked me two questions. "How will the U.S respond to us when we really test our nuclear weapons and rockets? Will they ignore us or do something?" "Do you think there is a possibility that America would really attack us?"

I was a little bit surprised when I heard these questions for two reasons. First, although I am a young Japanese woman who is not an expert in U.S. military affairs, the official felt inclined to ask me such a serious question. Second, though I gave him very simple and traditional answers, he took rigorous notes. During this point in our discussion, he appeared to be greatly worried about something. He finally said with downcast eyes and in a slight voice, "I don't want to misread America's intention."

Conclusion

In summation, though North Korea has strong suspicions against the U.S. and has lost the enthusiasm to negotiate with Washington, they still need to talk with the U.S. at the end of the day. It remains unclear which side will take action first; Will the U.S. approach the DPRK or will the DPRK give up on ignoring the U.S. and reengage in the six party talks? In any case, I have two suggestions to deal with the DPRK government to change the current dangerous situation. First of all, we need to pay attention not only to Kim Jong-Il or the next successor, but also to the hard-liners who affect decision-making in North Korea. I have often heard the popular sentiment, which espouses the idea that the current situation will improve following the death of Kim Jong-il. However, I do not believe that a new government will enact drastically different policy, as compared to the present one. Moreover, as we can see already, the DPRK has been moving towards a re-emphasis on developing the capabilities of their armed forces with the intention of being equal with the U.S. In this regard, simply waiting for the next DPRK administration is not an effective strategy for the international community.

Secondly, imposing new sanctions is necessary, but is not enough. I support the U.N.'s new sanctions against the DPRK. The international community needs to send a message that we don't accept their attitude of defiance and proliferation. However, to change the situation, the U.S. needs more fundamental action than ever before; to deal with the DPRK's focus on the legacy of the Korean War. Openly addressing this key historical point will serve to decrease distrust and hatred that both sides have.

The official I previously mentioned said that the DPRK will only believe in "actions" of the U.S. and is no longer interested in simply "words" from them. When I finally asked him what he required of the U.S. most, he answered, "only sincerity which we can believe from our heart." As long as North Korea feels that the U.S. looks down on them, and is only making demands, they will never open their door and nothing will be resolved.

III. Citations

[1] In May 2008 in Pyongyang, the official said that he wanted to focus on discussing with Washington now an improved bilateral relationship as much as possible.

[2] The official complained about all of the activities in South Korea, such as U.S. military exercises with the South Korean armed forces.

[3] The official said that even if the U.S. explains that they don't deliver any nuclear arms in South

Korea, the DPRK does not believe this. He insisted that as long as the DPRK can't get a chance to confirm that fact, they can't trust the U.S.'s explanation.

[4] The official always used the word "rocket" instead of "missile" or "satellite".

[5] Kim Il-sung sent a note to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1964 which expressed that Kim Il-sung supported denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. He mentioned in the note that "The DPRK government has consistently insisted that we should entirely prohibit to possessing nuclear arms and renounce them." Kim Jong-il also declared to the former president of South Korea Roh Moo-hyun in October 2007 at a summit meeting that "the DPRK doesn't have a desire to have nuclear arms pursuant to the late Great Leader Kim Il-sung instruction. This intention is very firm."

[6] When mentioning the plan of the proliferation of DPRK nuclear arms, the official used the word "Africa" as a place to sell, and never referred to the "Middle East" or other specific countries by name.

[7] Both Japan and the U.S. government concluded that the launch of Taepodong-2 in July 5th 2006 finally failed less than a minute after lift-off. With regards to the nuclear test on October 9th 2008, U.S. officials noted that the device may have been a nuclear explosive that misfired. Some U.S. experts also stated to several media outlets that the nuclear test had failed and the DPRK still didn't have the skill necessary to develop nuclear arms. The "satellite" launch on April 5th 2009 was also considered to have failed.

[8] The media and many experts of the DPRK tend to describe North Korea's attitude as "brinkmanship diplomacy." Even President Obama, on June 16th 2009 at the summit meeting with the South Korean President, expressed that the DPRK attitude is one of brinkmanship and criticized it by stating, "This is a pattern they've come to expect. We are going to break that pattern."

IV. 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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