

NORTH KOREAN REGRETS AND THE US-DPRK AGREED FRAMEWORK

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NORTH KOREAN REGRETS AND THE US-DPRK AGREED FRAMEWORK

NAPSNet VIRTUAL FORUM:

North Korean Regrets and the US-DPRK Agreed Framework

In response to the Op-Ed by Peter Hayes, [Breaking the Logjam](#) , NAPSNet posted six questions to our readers. Below are responses from:

- [Ralph Cossa](#) Executive Director, [Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies \(CSIS\)](#)
- Ambassador Donald Gregg Chairman of the Board, [US-Korea Society](#)
- Scott Snyder Program Officer, Research and Studies Program, [US Institute of Peace](#)

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1. What accounts for this breakthrough? Is the logjam in fact broken?

Cossa:

The DPRK "apology" reflects an apparent awareness in Pyongyang of the importance of maintaining the Agreed Framework and a realization that some statement of "regret" was essential to saving the agreement (which Pyongyang sees not as an end in itself but as a means of engaging the US and increasing the prospects of regime survival). The negotiations leading up to the DPRK statement of regret represent a successful example of US/ROK ability to play hardball if/when they get their act together (which does not happen nearly often enough). Peter's question is well put: now that the logjam is broken, will the ROK allow the water to flow through? Kim Young-sam has been handed an opportunity to demonstrate some bold leadership and move toward reconciliation; it's not entirely clear that this is his desired goal. (more on this later)

Gregg:

We have been dealing with a "right-hand, left hand" problem in DPRK for years. When they shot down our straying helicopter, and on many other instances there would be two responses from the North, one hard and one soft. Sending the submarine into the south while holding the Rajin-Sombong "trade festival" was another example of this, indicating that DPRK was speaking with two voices, and pursuing two strategies. The apology is significant to me in that it indicates that at times of real importance, Kim Chong Il can knock heads and make DPRK speak with one voice. I take this statement as a real set-back for the military/intelligence types who have for years never been held to account for their violent actions against the ROK.

In this case, I think that DPRK's acute food shortage, the wearing down of the economy, and the degradation of their military establishment forced them to take a step back. I think it is very significant.

Snyder:

North Korea's statement of regret and subsequent acceptance of the joint briefing show that no one wants heightened tensions, and that there is an opportunity for positive movement consistent with the mutual interests of all parties involved. But I do not yet consider these events to be a "breakthrough." They do open the door for continuing an indirect or mediated channel of communication between North and South Korea, which is in itself a positive and necessary development in support of the Agreed framework.

2. Do you agree that the Agreed Framework contributed to the resolution of this latest North-South confrontation over military transgressions of the Armistice by the DPRK?

Cossa:

As implied above, the Agreed Framework provided the incentive for the North (and the South) to compromise, since it serves the long-term interests of all sides. Even with its flaws, it remains the best possible deal and the best hope for setting the stage for eventual N-S reconciliation. However, it should not be seen as an end in itself but as a means of accomplishing long-term goals.

Gregg:

The Agreed Framework did contribute, but we should not get carried away about what its contribution was. The AG had put us in touch with that part of the DPRK establishment that knew it had to open up to the outside world if DPRK is to survive. Negotiations had gone well enough, and sufficient trust had been developed so that the "moderates" had a real stake in seeing that the AG continued. The AG had not put us in touch with the tough, hard-liners who persisted in tactics like the submarine. The disaster of the submarine exposed for all to see what a totally baDPRKrupt effort it had been. The hard-liners were either ignored or forced into line and the apology issued. If there had been no AG, it would have been harder to pull an apology out of DPRK, but the AG alone will not solve the problem of DPRK-- we have to get in touch with the hard liners, and start some sort of dialogue with them. Maybe the Chinese or the Russians can help on this.

Snyder:

Yes, the Agreed Framework and an evolution in assessments of North Korea's situation--which has been brought about through over three years of US negotiating experience with North Korea--provided a new context which dampened more vigorous or inflammatory policy options in Seoul or Pyongyang.

3. What incremental and major steps do you expect to see taken as a result of the breakthrough?

Cossa:

The joint briefing should be the next major step, although it will only be truly successful if it then leads to four party talks (which in turn will only be successful if the talks result in direct N-S dialogue with US and PRC providing the fig leaf). The opening of liaison offices should also follow, but DPRK could have had this months ago with only modest compromises, so it remains to be seen if they really want an American diplomatic presence in their capital at this time. I don't believe the South was the problem here or was "calling the shots" on U.S. foreign policy.

Gregg:

Your oped says it all. I have nothing to add.

Snyder:

Resumption of food aid from the international community, holding of the joint briefing and the

initiation of a direct (albeit mediated) North- South dialogue, and reduction of some economic sanctions are the immediate likely steps. Although many ideas have been floated in earlier talks and in the press, additional real progress remains to be determined in the context of the joint briefing. If the parties are prepared to continue discussions following that meeting (for instance, in the context of Four Party talks), then truly significance may be possible. However, progress is not assured, and many political variables could still intervene to derail or limit this fragile, nascent dialogue process, as the extended length of the New York negotiation process demonstrates.

4. Do you think that the ROK should take the lead in providing large-scale food aid to the DPRK?

Cossa:

Yes! Do I think they will: No! If Kim Young-sam has a "strategic vision" for dealing with the North or some idea of how he wants things to turn out, he has certainly kept it a secret. The problem is not Kim's advisors, but Kim. He still acts like a politician seeking re-election (constitutional constraints notwithstanding) rather than a statesmen seeking a place in history. He also seems more intent on making the North crawl than laying the groundwork for future progress. This is not to imply that all the problems are KYS-generated. The North remain the primary instigator and still seems unable to accept the ROK's legitimacy (although, as Peter notes, participation in the joint briefing will represent a positive step in that direction). But, KYS has let several opportunities for statesmanship pass and will probably do so again. Don't sell short China's ability to keep the DPRK from collapse. In fact, it may be useful to examine China's objectives in all this. Could it be that they would just as soon see to it that Pyongyang has no where else to turn but to Beijing? One wonders what kind of "private advice" Beijing is giving to Seoul on how to deal with the North, and how this fits Beijing's long-term objectives.

Gregg:

Go back to Kim Young Sam's very good and conciliatory speech of 15 August 1996 dealing with North-South relations. It is the framework which can be advanced. Yes, the South should lead on food-aid. They can do it and should do it.

Snyder:

I believe it is in South Korea's interest to provide some food aid on a humanitarian basis to North Korea, with monitoring conditions (unlike South Korea's previous 1995 deliveries). Large scale food aid by South Korea would probably not be possible without some evidence of North Korean willingness to engage in certain types of structural economic reforms. A modest start might come in the form of commitments to resume and expand certain types North-South economic cooperation (trade and investment). China's bumper harvest means that it is in an immediate position to give significant additional help to North Korea, if it is willing.

5. Do you expect the joint briefing concerning the four- power talks proposal to proceed quickly? Are you optimistic that such a briefing may lead to further progress toward settling the Korean conflict? Why or why not?

Cossa:

I'm not sure the joint briefing will proceed quickly or at all, but clearly it should. I'm not optimistic about the joint briefing or even the four party talks leading to any near term significant progress toward settling the Korean conflict, since that will only come when the two Koreas agree to turn the clock back to 1991 and start dealing directly with one another again. I'm not sure this can happen as long as KYS is President, although he can certainly help set the stage for it to happen a year or two down the road.

Gregg:

Things look fairly good now for progress. If the initial session or two, involving direct meetings between North and South on the four-power talks go well, there is a chance for real progress. If there are confrontations, as there well may be, things can be knocked off the rails again.

Snyder:

I expect the joint briefing to occur within a month. Such a briefing may lead to further progress in settling the Korean conflict if it is possible to initiate a serious negotiating process that is isolated from South Korean domestic political considerations. I expect such a process to be difficult and drawn out, and US involvement in and support for such a process will be indispensable.

6. Other comments: Please add any other comments you wish to make, either in response to Dr. Hayes' op-ed, or in response to the new situation.

Cossa:

I am no South Korea apologist, as my above comments should indicate. But, Peter's op-ed seems to be harder on the ROK than on the DPRK, despite the fact that it is Pyongyang that has instigated much of the trouble and remains so difficult to deal with in many respects. I think Peter also misses the point in his comments about U.S. military contacts with the DPRK. The reason the Pentagon has not proceeded further down this road has nothing to do with its lack of awareness of the benefits of dialogue or reluctance to talk with enemies. It has everything to do with ensuring that US-ROK military relations remain solid, since they remain the prerequisite to any peaceful settlement of the problem. I believe the US military needs to move very slowly, even in the POW/MIA area, to avoid sending the wrong signal (to North and South) about the willingness of the US military to "find a separate peace" with the DPRK. The most significant part of the four party proposal made by Kim and Clinton last year was the absolute statement that the US would enter in no peace-related discussions without the ROK. Unless and until the DPRK accepts this, there will never be meaningful progress toward peace. The 1991 Agreements proved that the two sides could get beyond the propaganda and talk meaningfully with one another. The question is, what will it take to fully revive these talks? As "I understand the Agreed Framework, resumption of N-S direct dialogue is the fundamental goal and that will require both sides to show some bold leadership and statesmanship. I think the US has done a credible job of once again leading the horses to water; I have no idea if either or both will choose to drink.

Gregg:

Maintaining trust between Seoul and Washington is essential to continued progress with DPRK. The fact that we could get DPRK to come up with a statement that the ROKS accepted is the most significant step I have seen taken with DPRK since the signing of the North-South agreement almost exactly five years ago.

Snyder:

South Korea's hard line political reaction to the submarine incident was understandable; however, I believe that US "arm-twisting" was really consultation and encouragement to South Korea to return to a policy direction that takes into account South Korean national interests and is embodied in the Agreed Framework (and which the South Korean government never officially renounced).

Ultimately, the choice to return to that policy path was South Korea's, and it was the South Korean government that ultimately decided to accept the North Korean statement and return to the status quo ante. The questions surrounding South Korea's domestic political environment, which are touched on but not developed at the end of Peter's essay, are now the critical factor in determining how far this process can go. If President Kim Young Sam's brand of democracy continues to develop parallels with the democratic style of Syngman Rhee, such developments may pose potentially fatal constraints on South Korean policy flexibility and leadership capacity during the coming year, with results that would cause considerable frustration in Washington and would be likely to insure greater rigidity on the part of Pyongyang.

Other Commentary of Interest

- Listen to [Peter Hayes' interview](#) on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered"

** NOTE: You will need an audio player to listen to the interview. One is available to download at no charge from [Real Audio](#)

- [New York Times Editorial, 01/01/97: "North Korea's New Message"](#)
- [PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, 12/31/96: "Narrowing the Divide"](#) -- Charles Krause's discussion with Kongdan Oh, Korean policy research analyst and Tony Namkung, Director of the Atlantic Council of the United States [Return to top of this page](#) NAPSNet Policy Forum Online

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