Policy Forum 11-39: Not Bad Options for the Six Party Talks


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Not Bad Options for the Six Party Talks

By Roger Cavazos

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I. Introduction

Roger Cavazos, a Nautilus Institute Associate, provides a brief overview North Korean diplomatic activities during the past few months. He concludes that the DPRK's recent moves to establish international rail and educational links and sudden changes in the positions of some key Six Party Talk leaders holds promise of changes in the DPRK. "The DPRK seems substantively different and might be ready to take some steps on its own. The DPRK will continue to have a high degree of centralized control, but there are strong, likely irreversible trends to decentralize some of that power. If no one reaches back towards those who are reaching out (e.g [the DPRK] in education) or those who are taking a risk by welcoming in limited outside forces (e.g. [the DPRK] re-establishing train lines) we will likely lose many opportunities for a long time."

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II. Report by Roger Cavazos

-“Not Bad Options for the Six Party Talks”
by Roger Cavazos
As Victor Cha often observes, “North Korea leaves you only with bad and worse options.” [1] So in relative terms, this means that the US stands to not lose much domestic capital by meeting with the DPRK. Renewed negotiations certainly beats increased tensions in Northeast Asia due to miscalculation as five major elections or changes of government are due in 2012. [2] In this particular case, “not losing much” means the parties external to DPRK assume a slight risk by simply speaking to the DPRK. A characteristic of more or less democratic governments is a very vocal opposition party to criticize almost every action of the government in place. The nearer a country is to election time, the greater the emphasis is on domestic concerns relative to the generally more ethereal issues in international relations. Also, the greater the focus on domestic issues, generally the less maneuvering room is available to politicians seeking election. Given that there are low expectations of breakthroughs, politicians focusing on domestic issues in the near term, and since government turnovers require some time to get people trained in their new roles, now is a good time for talks with the DPRK in order to increase understanding and common ground among the great powers and prevent miscalculation.
The table at the end of this report catalogs some of the extraordinary activities in November and October 2011. It shows several signs of the DPRK reaching out and trying to bring in outsiders, such as hosting Chinese Vice Premier Li Keqiang, hosting a banguet for PRC Ambassador to the DPRK, Liu Hongcai, holding Track I official meetings with the U.S. in Geneva, engaging in Track 1.5 semi-official talks in the U.S., establishing a rail link with Russia and inviting Japanese and Korean delegations to visit the DPRK. Some may explain these openings as ploys to earn hard currency, but only some of these engagements are cash earners, most are for the purposes of dialog. The cost of dialog to those external to the DPRK so far has been minimal. The internal risk the DPRK has taken in order to reach out and welcome these groups has been tremendous. Return on DPRK investment doesn’t only have to be in dollars, it can also be in terms of dialog. But not if it is dialog for dialog’s sake. It must be dialog to prevent miscalculation (first do no harm) and then to move toward a goal of increasing regional security.
At least one practical result of the dialogs should be finding legitimate forms of DPRK 'rent seeking' such as pipelines, free trade zones and tourism. Such forms of legitimate income are not outright rewards as the DPRK will still have to work for them, and they reinforce responsible behavior.
Moreover, in order to offer credible options in the international marketplace, the DPRK will have to develop some consistently promulgated and applied legal regimes.

There have been at least 19 noteworthy activities around the Six Party Talks and relations between the parties in the past month. This is a much higher level of activity than has been observed since at least 2008. However, this activity takes place in the context of a different objective reality. Things are changing on the Korean peninsula and if we continue looking at these activities exclusively through previous mind sets, assuming a static DPRK [3] only interested in self-preservation, we will likely miss many possible openings. Of course the DPRK still seeks regime survival, but they are likely looking for other things as well. There are signs that the DPRK is opening and changing in some very important ways as they struggle to find a way out of their present situation in order to prepare for the 100th anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth (as well as many other deadlines they set for themselves) in 2012. As an example, the DPRK has established trade zones with China, is on the "Cusp of a Digital Revolution," boasts a newly established presence in social media, and developed a small but capable corps to monitor telecommunications and to conduct surprise hacker attacks. And the DPRK has an unknown number of extremely unreliable nuclear weapons.

It is true that the DPRK has at least successfully demonstrated two nuclear tests under laboratory-like conditions and invited Dr. Siegfried Hecker to see the new enrichment facility. However, those actions are a type of external (and internal) communication. Most importantly, they indicate a clearly changed set of objective conditions when compared with the start of the Six Party Talks process. As many others have observed, it's time to acknowledge that some objective conditions have changed and start talking. [4] Given this new context, the DPRK seems to have been reaching out via the usual channels and some unusual ones, too.

Of particular interest is Kim Jong Il hosting PRC Ambassador Liu Hongcai shortly after the PRC Vice Premier's visit. It is fairly easy to imagine two broad scenarios for these meetings. In the first scenario, Kim Jong Il throws a dinner for PRC Ambassador Liu Hongcai to thank him for handling the Vice Premier Li Keqiang's visit well. An alternative interpretation might be Kim Jong Il asked Li to pass a message to ROK President Lee Myung-Bak. In turn the ROK President's answer to Li was relayed to PRC Ambassador after Li returned to China. Such back channel messages could be related to proposals, overtures or straight forward communication. When tied together in a timeline, it appears possible that the DPRK proposed something to the ROK. Perhaps the DPRK indicated a willingness to demonstrate its sincerity and desire to return to the Six Party Talks via increased interaction, however, abandoning nukes is too high of a threshold at this time. That interpretation would be consistent with the recent spate of activities. Perhaps it was a message from the DPRK that agreeing to the 2005 joint statement on next steps for the Six Party Talks was a good starting point for continued discussions. Perhaps there was another communication which wasn't publicly visible, but originated from the ROK to the DPRK and the more visible signs we see now are DPRK responses. However, it is more likely that the DPRK reached out first, given that most of the communication seems to be from the DPRK with a response from the ROK. It is important to note at this point relations between China and the DPRK are mainly conducted via International Liaison Department (ILD) of the Communist Chinese Party – not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. PRC Ambassador Liu is not a career diplomat, but instead was a vice deputy level leader at ILD. Thus any communication via Ambassador Liu presumably flows via two paths: the party and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. [5] In China, the party clearly reigns supreme over the state.

Even more interesting is the timing of U.S. National Security Advisor Thomas E. Donilon's trip to Beijing. Donilon's visit was almost certainly broader than one issue, and probably dealt with elements of the U.S.-China relationship such as upcoming senior leader interaction, the economy, security, and cooperation opportunities. Diving one layer deeper, senior leader interactions usually focus on upcoming events where Presidential and Cabinet-level meetings are likely to occur. Specifically, Cannes G-20, APEC, East Asia Summit and a reciprocal Vice President of PRC, Xin Jinping visit to the U.S. are some of the upcoming meetings/interactions where much of the scripting has to be done beforehand. Under the topic of economy are issues like currency and exchange rates, trade imbalance, and increasing Chinese domestic consumption. Security topics will almost

certainly include maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula, freedom of navigation and the South China Sea, counterterrorism, cyber issues, non-proliferation and military to military relations. Cooperative activities can be anything from global climate change to clean energy to environmental conservation. People to people exchanges are usually discussed as a separate topic. It was also interesting that Donilon's visit received little press coverage. Both U.S. and China would have benefited from publicizing high level visits like this one to show that the two great countries are handling their relationship in an adult manner. Also, a stable relationship assures the others in the region that, while they may hedge their relationships, they don't have to choose between the two great powers. Russia and China have long supported U.S. direct interaction with the DPRK. In general terms, the better the relations between the U.S., China, and Russia, the less leverage the DPRK has in the talks, thus increasing pressure on the DPRK. Even better, when the DPRK does engage in responsible behavior, and the great powers are in agreement, there are more opportunities for recognizing that behavior in low cost ways such as the previously mentioned legitimate rent-seeking opportunities.

But, in addition to senior-most levels of engagement, personnel turnover inside the Six Party negotiations creates room for a new dynamic. These new eyes are possible indicators of new approaches emerging. Minus the DPRK, the respective heads of the remaining five parties are also meeting much more frequently, although that is likely related to recent transitions as they meet their counterparts. In particular, the new South Korean head of delegation, Lim Sung Nam has travelled or will travel to Russia and China. In the DPRK, Ri Yong Ho has taken over from Kim Kye Gwan. [6] Even though Kim has a new position, it's reasonable to believe that he will still provide input to the DPRK team. Kim has recently travelled to the U.S. and China. Lim Sung Nam is moving into his new position as head of the ROK delegation to the Six Party Talks.

At least twice, Lim met with a delegation that had just previously met with Kim Kye Gwan. In both Beijing and Moscow the people who met Lim had just met Kim. Both China and Russia likely wanted to show the DPRK was first on their list, but the ROK was immediately behind. A DPRK and then ROK meeting sequence is consistent with backchannel messaging where DPRK has sent messages to the ROK via China and Russia. The ROK responds via some even less visible channel and then the DPRK uses Kim to communicate via China and Russia to Lim.

In the US, Ambassador Glyn Davies is taking over from Ambassador Stephen Bosworth. The best interpretation is that there is a recognition that playing the blame game is likely to lead nowhere but a deeper pit. Specifically for the U.S. side, moving in career State Department people indicates both importance and trust. Importance in that the State Department, smaller than one U.S. Infantry Division, is dedicating a significant portion of their most senior human resources to this one task. Trust in that the Executive branch is allowing one of its Departments to handle negotiations instead of retaining exclusive control at the White House. To be sure, Presidential prerogative can be exercised, but this small sign is encouraging.

One of DPRK's more interesting overtures occurred when the DPRK allowed a group of Japanese Doctors to interview atomic bomb survivors in the DPRK. [7] At least part of the DPRK calculus in selecting this visit likely included a desire to attack alliances. The DPRK likely believed this was a wedge issue which would incite Japanese anger with America since it was the U.S. who dropped the Atomic Bomb on Japan. However, the Japan-U.S. alliance is predicated upon a strong bond between Japan and the U.S. so it was ultimately not a wedge issue. The DPRK will also welcome a Japanese legislative visit. It is difficult to imagine under what circumstances DPRK may find such a visit pleasant; however, there are numerous circumstances under which a visit by Japanese legislators would be considered politically expedient to move forward on discussions. Neither of these visits are hard currency bonanzas.

The DPRK is also welcoming another Christian delegation from Seoul. Again, this is not a hard currency jackpot. Moreover, this visit allows the DPRK to score a double goal: appealing to the international human rights crowd and appealing to the ROK people. The DPRK should receive some positive recognition, but not a reward for acting responsibly. The name of this game is positively

reinforcing responsible behavior. Here we are, three weeks after the latest round of U.S.-DPRK meetings and nothing bad has happened. In fact, there has been a flurry of Six Party Talks related activity and not one major blow-up as of the time this article was written…not too bad.

This short essay only looked at a brief time period and only at certain events. However, a general conclusion is that the exchanges are still overwhelmingly government-led. Exchanges centered on the economy and education are vastly outnumbered by government to government meetings, but gaining ground. This imbalance reflects minimal economic exchanges. Increasing investment and trade should clearly be an action item for the parties to the talks. The issue has always been one of, how. A future essay with a longer and broader historical perspective will likely yield more policy recommendations.

The extremely rapid movement of the most senior leaders, the DPRK opening up rail and education links, and the sudden changes in key Six Party Talks positions hold promise of some changes in what many consider a static DPRK and should not immediately be dismissed as "we've been down this road before". The DPRK seems substantively different and might be ready to take some steps on its own. The DPRK will continue to have a high degree of centralized control, but there are strong, likely irreversible trends to decentralize some of that power. If no one reaches back towards those who are reaching out (e.g in education) or those who are taking a risk by welcoming in limited outside forces (e.g. re-establishing train lines) we will likely lose many opportunities for a long time. It is in our interest to present as many credible political solutions as possible to our leaders. Even the ones which don't seem to fit right now may provide enough of a spark for those with more experience and creativity to realize latent solutions.

Date	**Activity**
November 9	Japanese Lawmakers to visit DPRK [8]
November 3	South Korean Christians visit Pyongyang [9]
November 2-7	LIM Sung Nam (new ROK representative to 6PT) visits China to meet his Chinese counterpart WU Dawei [10]
November 1-2	ROK President LEE Myung Bak visits Russia [11]
November 1	Pres LEE announces ROK will set up reunification fund (USD 50 billion / Won 55 trillion) [12]
October 31	WU Dawei meets with Kim Kye Gwan in Beijing [13]
October 30	Kim Jong Il hosts dinner for PRC Ambassador
October 28	Russia meets with DPRK KIM Kye Gwan and separately meets with ROK delegation. [14]
October 28	ROK and U.S. military forces vowed to raise combat readiness levels [15]
October 27	Two days of talks between U.S. and DPRK ends with no breakthroughs [16]
October 26-27	Chinese Vice Premier visits ROK. [17]
October 26	LIM Sung Nam goes to Moscow to visit Russian counterpart.
October 25	North Korea state media dub heir apparent Kim Jong-un a 'General' [18]
Last Week of October	Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialog (Track 1.5) likely takes place. [19] By design, very low key.
October 23-25	Chinese Vice Premier Li Keqiang visits DPRK. [20]
October 22-24	U.S. National Security Advisor Donilon visits Beijing. [21]
October 20	EXPLICITLY "STANDALONE HUMANITARIAN MATTER" U.S. and DPRK agree to resume recovering remains of those Prisoner of Wars-Missing in Action. [22]
October 19	Mongolia and DPRK agree to education exchanges. [23]
October 13	Russian train travels to NKorea along repaired link. [24]

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