

Policy Forum 09-004: Obama's Options on North Korea

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I. Introduction

Tong Kim, a visiting professor at the Graduate University of North Korean Studies, and an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), notes recommendations for the Obama administration in dealing with the DPRK including that it, "tell the North Korean leadership that a meeting with President Obama is possible when the United States and its allies are convinced that the North truly intends to abandon its nuclear weapons even before complete denuclearization. To prove its intentions, the North must take positive but irreversible

steps."

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II. Article by Tong Kim

- "Obama's Options on North Korea"

By Tong Kim

Since Barack Obama's election as the next U.S. president, Korea watchers have eagerly debated what his administration might do about North Korea. Obama inherits the unfinished business of North Korean denuclearization at a time when the United States is facing the worst economic recession in decades and more urgent foreign policy issues -- Afghanistan, Iraq and the recently renewed warfare in Gaza. The economy and the Middle East will dictate his priorities.

And yet, the importance of pursuing a denuclearized Korean Peninsula does not change as long as the United States has continuing strategic interests in maintaining peace and stability in Asia and in ensuring that Pyongyang keeps a lid on the further proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Many conservative analysts believe - or want to believe - that Obama will be little different from George W. Bush in terms of his approach to North Korea and continue with the six-party process that the Bush administration has pushed forward in the last two years with noteworthy success, with which the conservatives were not pleased. They had wanted to see no progress, wishfully hoping that North Korea would collapse somehow by itself.

On the other hand, many progressive thinkers earnestly expect Obama to increase direct talks with the North Koreans, leading to an Obama-Kim Jong-il meeting within or outside the six-party frame to bring about a conclusive resolution to the chronic North Korean problem. They believe President Obama can and will dismantle Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program in return for the normalization of ties with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

This group thinks the new U.S. president, uncertain of quick success on other diplomatic fronts, would be interested in facilitating the denuclearization of North Korea, which appears to be more feasible. The DPRK, through its New Year's joint editorial published in the newspapers representing the party, the military and the youth of North Korea, has signaled that it wants to negotiate with the Obama administration more seriously than it did with the Bush administration. The North learned eight years ago when Bush took over from Clinton that U.S. policy and its approach can change with a new administration.

A third view emerging among many other observers is that the North Korean issue will be put on the backburner again, as Obama will be swarmed with more pressing domestic and foreign policy issues that will demand his focused attention. His administration's policy will be limited to the "management" of the North Korean issue by accepting the status quo, in which the North keeps a freeze on additional nuclear production but remains a restrained nuclear power.

In Washington the people who will soon take the job of dealing with North Korea - some of whom supported Obama's candidacy during the campaign - have certainly been studying the Korean issue and should have a pretty good idea of what course of action the next administration should take from day one. The Obama team is now being formed, and I have some suggestions for it:

Stay the course with the six-party talks, but with more intensified and realistic negotiation with the

DPRK. Despite some serious problems, the utility of the six-party forum is not disputed. The forum enables the United States to share the burden of denuclearization with four other participants -- China, Russia, Japan and South Korea - and the forum continues to provide an opportunity to develop into a multilateral security organization for East Asia. North Korea has become convinced that it is better to have a multilateral security guarantee from the six-party talks than to get a bilateral security arrangement from the United States, because a multilateral agreement is harder to break and than a bilateral agreement. It remembers the abrogation of the bilateral Agreed Framework.

The goal of negotiation should be the North's complete and verifiable nuclear disarmament. A final settlement should never accept the DPRK as a nuclear power, limited or otherwise. Verification should be a continuing process that can begin during, and end after, the third phase of the Feb. 13 agreement for dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear facilities and the disposition of nuclear weapons. Don't get hung up on a written verification accord at this point.

Discard the Bush policy of "denuclearization first." It won't work. Set timelines for ending the state of war in Korea and concluding a peace agreement to replace the armistice agreement. The timelines will have to be linked to specific progress in negotiation, but a peace regime does not have to wait until after denuclearization, nor should it be agreed upon concurrently with formal diplomatic recognition after facility dismantlement but before the final removal of Pyongyang's actual weapons. Undertake negotiations on both issues - a peace agreement and normalization - parallel with nuclear talks. Normalization should be part of a final quid pro quo at the end of the process.

Showing strong willingness to resolve the nuclear issue with the North does not mean that the United States is giving up other available options including sanctions. During the Bush administration "other options" were interpreted as resorting to military action, which the North Koreans have claimed would be a preemptive nuclear attack against them. While sanctions have proved little efficacy on the North, diplomacy has not yet been given full support by Washington. The last two years of Bush's effort -- actually assistant secretary of state Christopher Hill's hard effort -- was obstructed by stiff opposition from the remaining hardliners in the administration.

Draw a new road map with a conceptual, flexible timetable including a clear beginning and end, although it will be subject to revision and require a constant review as it encounters new twists and turns. Don't hold your breath on the possibility of a sudden change or an implosion in the North. It is not likely to happen any time soon. If history is guidance, the shortest lived kingdom in Korean history -Palhae -- lasted about 200 years: the DPRK, which I have called a Confucian nationalist monarchy -- is only 60 years old.

Prepare for discussion of the DPRK's persistent interest in light-water reactors (LWRs), the provision of which will be one of the most critical issues, along with normalization, the North Koreans will demand as conditions or rewards for giving up their nuclear weapons. Develop reliable preventive measures against any possible accumulation of weapon's grade fissile material from LWR operation. Remember that one third of the LWR project under the Agreed Framework had been completed after spending more than \$1.2 billions from the South Korean government, before it was halted by the Bush administration in 2002. An alternate path other than LWRs is still possible either by way of conventional power generation or massive power supply from the South -- if it is acceptable to the North. A thorough study should be conducted with a fresh look at the pros and cons of each option.

Design separate strategies for missiles and other security issues, which should include threats imposed by chemical and biological weapons and forward deployed conventional forces of the Korean People's Army. Dissociate political and human rights issues from security issues. Think of

possible payoffs from threat reductions for the coming years of economic downturn. Bite the bullet and forget about a package deal. The issues are too complex, although they are legitimate causes of concern to the U.S.; tackle the security issues first. Such issues as illicit international activities by the North - including alleged counterfeiting, drug and human trafficking - can be dealt with even after normalization.

Appoint a chief North Korea policy officer at the State Department reporting directly to the secretary of state and the president, or appoint a non-proliferation czar at the White House to focus on proliferation issues, including a focus on North Korea and Iran. The reported appointment of Wendy Sherman, former assistant to President Clinton and his North Korean policy coordinator, to a similar State Department position is an encouraging sign of Obama's commitment to the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue.

Dispatch Ambassador Sherman, if she lands the job, and if not, whoever may be in that capacity, as a presidential envoy to Pyongyang early on, before the reconvening of the six-party talks. The envoy can inform the North Koreans that the United States would be ready to resume talks. Have the envoy assure them of Washington's willingness to vindicate the basic premises laid out in the U.S.-DPRK Joint Communiqué of October 12, 2000, ensuring that neither side harbors hostile intent toward the other and both promise respect for "each other's sovereignty and non-interference in each other's internal affairs."

The envoy can tell the North Korean leadership that a meeting with President Obama is possible when the United States and its allies are convinced that the North truly intends to abandon its nuclear weapons even before complete denuclearization. To prove its intentions, the North must take positive but irreversible steps.

The envoy's initial visit to Pyongyang could be augmented by a Track II approach. Send heavyweights - such as former secretary of state Madeline Albright, who met with Kim Jong-il in 2002, Henry Kissinger, Bill Perry or Sam Nunn - the last three of whom were recommended by James T. Laney, a former ambassador to South Korea, in a recent conference in Seoul that I attended. But in this writer's view, Albright will be most effective to restore Kim Jong Il's trust in the United States based on their successful meeting earlier.

These prominent Americans can visit Pyongyang individually on a well-spaced time schedule or as a group should the need arise. Also, a visit by a bipartisan congressional delegation will also be helpful. Consider sending former Congressman Curt Weldon, who was very well received by Pyongyang because of his creative ideas for nuclear resolution and his frank and pragmatic attitude toward the North Korean regime. In any case, the message should be consistent: The United States wants to improve relations with the North and help its economy if it's willing to work with the U.S. in order to resolve issues of concern to the United States. Although much has changed in the world, the nature of the fundamental issue between the U.S. and the DPRK has not changed.

Resume negotiations with Pyongyang when the new team is ready, but quickly. While talks are underway in a multilateral forum in Beijing, this writer recommends that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meet bilaterally with her DPRK counterpart on the sidelines of the next ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum). Even with just an exchange of views and information, this level of diplomacy authoritatively ensures that negotiations that are carried out at lower levels are fully supported by their respective government.

Persuade Seoul and Pyongyang to resume inter-Korean dialogue, which Washington failed at during the Kim Young-sam administration. It's difficult when the two Koreas are at each other's throats. Both should stop blaming each other and make more proactive attempts at restoring relations. The

North should stop personal attack on President Lee Myung-bak, and the South should make explicitly clear that it will respect the two summit agreements that Kim Jong-il signed with Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun.

I also suggest that Kim Jong-il seize this opportunity to improve relations with the United States and enhance his country's security and economy as he has yet to demonstrate a genuine interest in abandoning nuclear weapons.

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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