



Policy Forum Online 09-079A: Response to “U.S. Strategy Towards North Korea: Rebuilding Dialogue and Engagement



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Recommended Citation

Tong Kim, "Policy Forum Online 09-079A: Response to “U.S. Strategy Towards North Korea: Rebuilding Dialogue and Engagement”, NAPSNet Policy Forum, October 01, 2009, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/policy-forum-online-09-079a-r-sponse-to-u-s-strategy-towards-north-korea-rebuilding-dialogue-and-engagement/>

Policy Forum Online 09-079A: October 1st, 2009

By Tong Kim

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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay, "[U.S. Strategy Towards North Korea: Rebuilding Dialogue and Engagement](https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/policy-forum-online-09-079a-r-sponse-to-u-s-strategy-towards-north-korea-rebuilding-dialogue-and-engagement/)" by Joel Wit, an Adjunct Senior Visiting Scholar at Columbia University's Weatherhead Institute for East Asia and a Visiting Fellow at the U.S.-Korea Institute at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, which appeared as Policy Forum Online 09-079A: October 1st, 2009.

This response includes comments by Tong Kim, Visiting professor with the University of North Korean Studies, Research professor, Ilmin Institute of International Relations at Korea University, and Adjunct professor at SAIS.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Masa Takubo

- Comments by Tong Kim

The author's report contains several provocative thoughts deserving consideration by the Obama administration, which has announced its willingness to offer a "comprehensive solution" if North Korea takes irreversible steps toward denuclearization. The author's insights of the developments in North Korea are refreshingly similar to those of other "realists," who are labeled as "apologists" by skeptic conservatives. Many of his suggestions are creative and intriguing, while other ideas resemble a reinstatement of the Clinton administration's approaches that had been carried out with some impressive progress until the reversal of U.S. policy by the first W. Bush administration. A transformational approach to North Korea, as opposed to transactional, resonates with the concept of "reform and opening" through economic assistance, as a necessary step toward reunification as conceived by the Sunshine policy of former South Korean President Kim Dae Jung. There is no question that improved relations based on mutual confidence will provide the best chance to achieve denuclearization and removal of WMD threats of North Korea.

The author's two-phase strategy would begin first to obtain negotiated measures to contain expansion and development of North Korea's nuclear arsenal and to prevent proliferation activities -- including possible transfer of fissile materials or nuclear weapons to other rogue states or terrorists. The strategy then would gradually move toward "rolling back" and denuclearization. This would be supported by other initiatives on missiles, a peace process for the Korean Peninsula, human rights, and illicit activities. This complex plan appears to lack a coordinated timetable - parallel or sequential -- for undertaking and completion of these initiatives. It lacks a concept of how they would be linked to or support different phases of the denuclearization process.

The strategy would take a prolonged and seemingly endless process of negotiations, which may be a welcome to the Pyongyang that practiced "salami tactics" in the past. [1] A sliced and indefinitely protracted process, which the author is uncertain will actually denuclearize North Korea at the end, may not be politically acceptable to Washington and its allies, who believe the nuclear talks of the past failed because of the North Koreans playing the game of squeezing rewards from each stage of negotiation for their repeated bad behaviors. Undoubtedly, any future denuclearization process will be more difficult and therefore more time-consuming than it was before North Korea's second nuclear test in May and its missile tests in April and July. If the horse is for resale or for a new lease, the price has jumped.

Another problem with the suggested strategy is found in its excessive or exclusive reliance on a fresh bilateral U.S.-DPRK process at the expense of the accomplishments of the six-party talks, including the September 19 Joint Statement of 2005 and the February 13 Agreement of 2007 and the gains obtained thereto from these agreements.

While bilateral negotiation is essential to any progress in denuclearization as part of a multilateral process and there are bilateral issues to address independently of or in conjunction with multilateral talks, the Obama administration is sticking to the six-party process with the support of five other

parities -the United States, China, South Korea, Japan and Russia. There is a consensus in the international community that the six-party forum is still the best venue to seek a resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. Kim Jong Il has just announced that his country "will return to multilateral talks, including the 6-party talks, depending on the outcome of the planned U.S.-DPRK talks."

The author's step by step gradual approach is diametrically opposed to South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's proposal of "a grand bargain," - which offers an one-time transactional package deal designed to break North Korea's pattern of "brinkmanship and salami tactics." Although Lee's proposal was a non-starter in view of the deteriorated state of inter-Korean relations and the complexity of the issue,[2] it nevertheless represents the latest position of the Seoul government, with which Washington will have to cooperate closely on denuclearization. The "grand bargain" proposal, which seemed to have been more geared toward domestic consumption in Seoul, was quickly rejected by Pyongyang, which insists that the nuclear issue is a matter to be settled between the United States and North Korea.[3]

Pyongyang maintains its nuclear program is a byproduct of "U.S. hostile policy." The past efforts of the United States to persuade the North Koreans that Washington harbors no hostile intent or policy toward Pyongyang, except on its nuclear program, never succeeded. The US-DPRK joint communiqué of September 2000, followed by Albright's visit to Pyongyang the next month, was a good starting point but its positive impact lived too short to erase the history of long hostile relations between the two countries. Kim Jong Il was quoted this week as saying, "The hostile relations between the DPRK and the United States should be converted into peaceful ties through the bilateral talks." [4]

In the past several calculated U.S. measures - including the negative security assurance in the September 19 Joint Statement, stipulating that the United States has "no intention to attack or invade the DPRK;" the U.S. delisting of the DPRK as a terrorism sponsor state, an important corresponding action taken during the Phase II implementation of the February 13, 2007 agreement - were not able to end Pyongyang's accusation of Washington's hostile policy toward Pyongyang.

Pyongyang's definition of "U.S. hostile policy" is stretched out to include non-existent American nuclear weapons in South Korea, an alleged U.S. nuclear war plan against the North and its perceived threats from joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises. The UN sanctions currently in place are providing the perfect ground for Pyongyang's accusation against "the U.S. policy to isolate and stifle North Korea."

North Korea says the withdrawal of "U.S. hostile policy" is the prime condition for North Korea's denuclearization, a more fundamental condition than other incentives - including normalization of relations, a peace treaty and an economic aid package. It is important for Washington to ask Pyongyang what exactly would require as a proof of non-hostile policy. In other words, if the revival of the agreements from the six party talks is not sufficient, albeit many of the agreements were not implemented, what other actions would put the North Koreans back on track toward denuclearization? An exchange of laundry lists of complaints and demands from both sides - North Korea and the United States backed by its allies and its partners -- would help understand if there is room for narrowing the differences toward the completion of denuclearization. Pyongyang's demand for an apology from the UN Security Council for condemning the DPRK's rocket launch of April should be interpreted as a political protest rather than as a practical demand.

Some specific comments:

--- The view that Pyongyang's security policy has shifted to reliance on nuclear weapons is plausible.

However, the North Koreans have been the tactics of obscuring their true intent with respect to denuclearization. They have been sending a contradictory message that they "do not oppose denuclearization," which they still say is "the death bed wish of the great leader Kim Il Song" [5] while saying that they "would not give up nuclear weapons," unless "U.S. hostile policy" is removed.

The North Koreans have all along applied a dual approach to the United States, claiming that it is "ready for dialogue or confrontation" whichever the United States chooses. The bottom line is that the North Koreans are ready to continue living in isolation and economic hardship in order to protect their system. At the absence of confidence in the pronounced U.S. intent, survival by reliance on nuclear weapons comes first before economic and political benefits are obtained through improved relations with the United States.

---The premise that dialogue and engagement should supplement the current policy of containment and isolation is the right approach.

As the author argues, pressures from sanctions alone, especially without China's full participation, would not force Pyongyang to give up its nuclear programs. The author does not seem to oppose "tough measures" of sanctions as imposed and implemented on the North at the initiative of the United States. Sanctions may not bite enough, but they certainly make it more difficult for the North to trade arms and materials and to keep generating revenues from illicit activities, which it needs for perfecting its missiles and nuclear weapons. They may help deprive North Korean leaders of a luxurious life style. Sanctions will also reinforce the potential strength of the Proliferation Security Initiative for the prevention of proliferation.[6] If dialogue and engagement make progress on denuclearization and removal of missile threats, lifting of sanctions should be considered at that point. In the meantime, a two-track approach of pressure and dialogue, for the lack of a better option, seems to be a prudent course to take.

--- Avoiding a "rush back into denuclearization talks" but "opting for an initial set of exploratory discussions"

While this suggestion would be useful to examine the changed positions of the North Koreans since the last U.S.-DPRK talks in December 2008, care should be exercised to avoid sending the wrong message that the United States wants to start fresh from scratch with respect to what should be done for the completion of denuclearization.[7] In initial bilateral talks Washington should assure that once Pyongyang returns to the six party talks, Washington will continue bilateral discussions or negotiations in parallel with or within the context of the six-party talks. Washington may want to review with the North Koreans where they left off in the last round of the six-party process and to identify differences to address once the multilateral process resumes. It is critical to require Pyongyang, as a first step in the new round of the six-party talks, to file an updated declaration of its nuclear programs - including the status of Pyongyang's reversion to the reconstruction of the Yongpyon facilities and the progress of its uranium activities that Pyongyang has recently said are succeeding.[8]

--- Talking to Kim Jong Il, still the best window of opportunity

The author's assessment that the United States should negotiate with Kim Jong Il, while he is in control of Pyongyang's decision making is supported by many realists. Former President Bill Clinton's report on the North Korean leader's health to President Obama must have had a big impact on Washington's outlook of the North Korean situation [9] and its consequent approach to denuclearization. There are indications that Washington had been impacted by the theories of a sudden change or collapse of North Korea due to Kim Jong Il's ill health and a speculated succession crisis.

Obviously, now there appears to be no succession crisis in Pyongyang. There is no evidence that supports that Pyongyang was ever in a crisis because of Kim's health. If North Korean military authorities' belligerent actions against the South last year were taken at the absence of Kim Jong Il's direct control, such actions may have represented the desire of the KPA to show their loyalty to their leader, while he was sick. The military is the direct beneficiary of Kim Jong Il's policy of "the military first."

---- Timing of a declaration to end the Korean War, a peace agreement and establishment of diplomatic normalization

As discussed thoroughly by the author, these issues are very important to the end state of nuclear negotiation - realization of denuclearization and a new security arrangement for Northeast Asia. However, there is a question of how to time-line resolutions of these issues to satisfy the respective positions of the parties concerned. North Korea has argued that normalization of relations is not the end that they seek from denuclearization, but it should rather be a means to achieve denuclearization. Pyongyang prefers denuclearization through normalization, rather than the other way around.

Sequencing of these issues could be determined roughly in the order of ending the war, a peace agreement, normalization, and a new multilateral security system. However, if measures to end the war and to conclude a peace agreement are taken as part of the denuclearization process, it will be conducive to the building of trust to serve as a proof of non-hostile policy. Final steps of normalization can be carried out simultaneously with the final phase of completing denuclearization - in an ultimate formula of action for action.

Despite the above points of my argument, I respect and admire the author's comprehensive piece of creative work that should help expand the horizon of U.S. policy makers, as they approach the next phase of dialogue with the North Koreans.

III. Notes

[1] The author's idea could be more useful to the North Koreans than to the Obama administration, as they can expect Washington to fall into their preferred prolonged process of negotiation.

[2] For a "one-time deal grand bargain" to succeed, it would require an inter-Korean summit as well as an Obama-Kim Jong Il meeting that can bring about a dramatic shift in their relations, building a level of mutual trust needed for a quick resolution of the nuclear problem of North Korea.

[3] KCNA report on September 30. This report said, the "grand bargain" was a "ridiculous proposal," seeking "to meddle and stand in the way...between the DPRK and the United States.

[4] KCNA report of October 7.

[5] North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and his cabinet premier Kim Young Il have reiterated Kim Il Song's will on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula during the Chinese Prime Minister's visit to Pyong yang this week. Also the DPRK's letter to the UNSC dated September 4, 2009 stating that the DPRK "never objected the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula; a North Korean foreign ministry spokesman rebuked the UNSC resolution 1887 for a world free of nuclear weapons as a "double standards document," insisting that "the DPRK was compelled to have access to nuclear deterrent."

[6] Victor Cha in his essay "What Do They Really Want?" published by The Washington Quarterly, October 2008, page 128, and other conservatives, both moderate and ultra, have argued that despite the "lack of teeth" of the resolution 1874 - without authorization for use of force to inspect suspected

North Korean ships, the UN sanctions are biting. They also argue that as the resolution is effectively helping institutionalize the Bush initiated PSI. Some, including the South Korean president, claimed that the North Koreans were shifting their provocations to charm offensives to avoid further biting from sanctions. President Obama said on CNN on September 20, "some of the toughest sanctions we've seen is having an impact." Some North Korea watchers interpreted the recent North Korean conciliatory gestures in the context of Pyongyang's pattern of shifting between "confrontation and dialogue." Bob Carlin, a former State Department's Intelligence and Research veteran on North Korea, told a SAIS audience on October 1 that Pyongyang's shift fits its behavioral pattern. Carlin, who had just returned from Pyongyang, also said the sanctions are not biting ordinary people on the streets in Pyongyang. I share Joel Wit's view that sanctions are not biting enough and are not likely to resolve the nuclear issue, but it is still necessary to keep them in place until Pyongyang's real, positive intentions are confirmed through the upcoming talks.

[7] Kim Jong Il has just announced that the North would return to the six-party talks. Earlier on September 19, Kim Jong Il told China's envoy, Dai Bingguo, that Kim would be willing to consider "bilateral and multilateral talks" to resolve the nuclear dispute with the international community

[8] Pyongyang's letter to the UNSC, dated September 9, said North Korea's uranium enrichment experiments have successfully proceed to a concluding phase.

[9] Obama told CNN on September 20 that it was "important to know President Clinton's assessment" that Kim Jong Il is "pretty healthy and in control...because we don't have a lot of interaction with the North Koreans."

IV. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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