


Policy Forum - “Six Party Talks and Multilateral Security Cooperation”

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“Six Party Talks and Multilateral Security Cooperation”

Building a New Security Architecture in Northeast Asia

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Presented to 9th Jeju Forum Panel by Peter Hayes, Director at the Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability.

1. Six Party Talks and Multilateral Security Cooperation

It is self-evident that the Six Party Talks (6PT) as we knew them are moribund. They have not met for seven years, since before Obama, Xi, Park, and Kim Jong Un took power in the US, China, ROK, and DPRK. The DPRK has since tested its nuclear weapons twice, and fired a long-range rocket. The 6PT institutional working group chaired by Russia did not lead to any declared principles or enduring concepts in the last 6PT Joint Statement issued on Friday July 20, 2007.

Thus, states are free to improvise, go their own way, and cut their own deals, which is exactly what had done, as the great powers asserted their underlying power capacities—the United States by its “rebalancing” military-first strategy; China by its in-your-face pushing and shoving in island and offshore disputes with Southeast Asia and Japan; and Japan with its historical revisionism and attempts to revise the constitutional basis for participation in “collective defense.”

The only reason to revive the 6PT, as some observant Chinese scholars told me in April, is so that Japan can join the talks in a pre-established framework and sit at the same table as China. No other format is conceivable at this point. Thus, the only format in which it is possible to grapple with the challenges posed by the DPRK’s nuclear breakout in an inclusive manner are the 6PT.

2. DPRK Focus

The Six Party Talks were established to eliminate the DPRK’s nuclear threat, and by implication, the risk of nuclear war in Korea, and the risk of further proliferation by the ROK, Japan, and even Taiwan. The focus was the DPRK’s nuclear weapons issues. The approach was multilateral, but the essence was bilateral, US-DPRK talks held in bilateral breakouts, with China formulating compromise texts that allowed the talks to resume without forcing irreconcilable positions to resolution.

In this game, the DPRK was always more agile and better positioned to bargain and stall than the United States. The United States attempted to shape the DPRK’s behaviors, and failed to do so constantly. Resuming the 6PT to repeat this exercise would be useless, especially as the facts on the ground have shifted. Old wine in this old bottle I not vintage but rather, has become undrinkable vinegar.

3. Six Party Talks for a Comprehensive Security Settlement

What new wine can be poured into this old bottle? In essence, the six parties and their partners need to create a new “comprehensive” security settlement in a treaty format.

By comprehensive, we mean that at the outset, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed and only then does the negotiation concerning implementation and sequencing commence. This is the basis of the 6+1 Iran Deal in the Joint Plan of Action and the proposed long-term comprehensive agreement currently under negotiation. A similar approach is necessary in talks with the DPRK.

In this approach, the DPRK cannot divert the international conversation into a discussion only about the details of a peace settlement and the DPRK and other possible parties are crystal clear that not only must all elements of the settlement come into effect at the same time; but they must also be negotiated in parallel. Until then, sanctions remain or are strengthened.

A comprehensive security settlement requires a regional treaty framework, not just a political agreement, if it is to be meaningful to all the parties including the DPRK.[1] Anything less will fail and leave the states in the region on a roller coaster ride of confrontation and stand-off, of semi-permanent crisis (which can take many forms, see section 7 below). This treaty, which might be titled A Northeast Asia Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, would have six key elements, all of which are necessary.

The key elements of the treaty would be:

1. Termination of state of war
2. Creation of a permanent security council on security to monitor and verify compliance and deciding on violations;
3. A mutual declaration of no hostile intent
4. Provisions of assistance for nuclear and other energy
5. Termination of sanctions
6. A nuclear weapons free zone.

A comprehensive regional agreement on security requires ratification by a number of states, although adherence to sections would be specific to the signatory states.

Provisions would come into effect in a staggered manner - immediately upon ratification or when various conditions are met.

A 7th element, inter-Korean reconciliation leading to peaceful reunification could be included as part of this settlement, depending on the views of the two Koreas.

4. Hard Security and New Security Architecture

Within this comprehensive framework, the hardest of the security issues, that of nuclear threat by the nuclear weapons states to non-nuclear states in Northeast Asia, the provision of US nuclear extended deterrence to its allies in the region, and the DPRK's breakout and nuclear threat, would be managed and resolved in a Northeast Asian nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ).

The DPRK continues to insist that US nuclear threat towards it must cease before it will revert to non-nuclear weapons status; and that this guarantee must be legally binding.

The only framework in which this is possible is a NWFZ. Such a NWFZ is possible and last July, the

UN Secretary General urged states in the region to consider appropriate action to establish a nuclear-weapon-free zone in North-East Asia, “including by promoting a more active role for the regional forums in encouraging transparency and confidence-building among the countries of the region.”[2]

Such a NWFZ would not end nuclear extended deterrence although it would require the ROK and Japan to recast their perceptions of what constitutes nuclear extended deterrence from a Cold War concept based on forward-deployed weapons and instant nuclear retaliation to a post-Cold War concept that I term “nuclear existential deterrence.” Should a state renege on their commitments under a NWFZ treaty, then all the nuclear weapons states are committed to countering nuclear aggression. Should the transgression be from the DPRK either halting its denuclearization to comply with a NWFZ or a new breakout, then US guarantees to not use nuclear threat or attack would be moot.

We don’t know how valuable such a legally binding guarantee would be to the DPRK. As a piece of paper, we can assume it’s worthless. As part of a comprehensive security process, it is likely extremely valuable. Whether this would suffice to move Kim Jong Un to follow in his fathers’s and grandfather’s footsteps in striving for an end to US nuclear threat is unknown.

As this is the only way to meet North Korean demands on this score, it would be wise to find out.

5. Other soft and hard security and sustainability issues

Last November, ROK Vice Minister Cho Tae-yul explained that past ROK NEA peace and cooperation initiatives have been either top-down and focused on hard security issues, and failed; or were too ambitious in their attempt to tackle hard and soft issues on a functional regional basis, and failed.[3]

In reality, functional and inclusive (of the DPRK) regional cooperation has been underway for more than three decades. The Northwest Pacific Action Plan (UNEP), the Regional Oceans Programme (GEF), the regional acid rain program (World Bank and others), the Tuman River regional development strategy (UNDP), and many others, have met many times and implemented collaborative (that is, joint) projects including in-DPRK and cross-border projects, for decades. These dialogues did not lead to trust-building sufficient to support “hard” security dialogues, although they did provide many communication channels with DPRK counterparts for mutual learning over these decades; and in some cases, were used by states in times of crisis to achieve conflict avoidance.

I see no reason to expect low-politics, soft and functional approaches to be any more successful in engaging the DPRK and resolving high-politics, hard security issues than over the past three decades. Rather, national leaders must set a tone by creating an atmosphere that is conducive to tackling the hardest, most divisive security issues; and then pursue multiple functional and soft engagement strategies as a complement to the high-level process. This is exactly what is missing in the Park Administration’s regional initiative and is negated by reference to collapse and reunification bonanzas in Administration rhetoric; and until it exists, the DPRK will respond only in opportunistic and often negative ways to such overtures.

Let me give an example. The Park Administration’s approach, as I understand it, attempts to support both approaches, but not quickly, and wherever possible, to include North Korea. Thus, one commitment by President Park is to push for the creation of a DMZ Peace Park. Yet arguably this is

the hardest place to start cooperation with the DPRK. An alternative approach is one that starts as far away from the militarily sensitive DMZ as possible, at the DPRK borders with Russia and China, and the marine border between the ROK and Japan, and visualizes a regional biodiversity corridor that culminates with a peace park at the DMZ as the final outcome of a decadal plus rate of implementation, not the starting point.[4]

Proposing talks on a regional biodiversity, perhaps convened at the outset by Mongolia in a partnership with South Africa, a leading peace park practitioner as well as UNC ally, might be a useful non-nuclear supplement in a comprehensive security framework, to move beyond a regional focus solely on the DPRK's nuclear threat to a more constructive security agenda.

Similarly, to kick-start a dialogue and deepened understanding of a NWFZ, the ROK could work with Indonesia and Vietnam to support a regional study tour of the SEA NWFZ.

This is new wine to pour into the old 6PT bottle.

6. Regional Futures and ROK Diplomatic Strategy

In 2013, the US NIC presented[5] a useful overview of four possible strategic futures for East Asia in 2030—as far into the future roughly as the original US-DPRK Agreed Framework now is in the past. These were:

- i. A continuation of the **present order** that mixes rules-based cooperation and quiet competition within a regional framework structured around existing alignments sustained by US leadership.
- ii. A **balance-of-power order** of unconstrained great power competition fueled by dynamic shifts in relative power and a reduced US role.
- iii. A **consolidated regional order** in which an East Asian community develops along the lines of Europe's democratic peace, with China's political liberalization a precondition for such a regional evolution.
- iv. A **Sinocentric order** centered on Beijing that sustains a different kind of East Asian community on the basis of China's extension of a sphere of influence across the region.

These four overarching regional orders can be specified more concretely as shown in Table 1 which adds three bipolar possible orders to the NIC list of four orders.

Table 1: Regional Orders 2030

Multipolar:

- cooperative-competitive (fluid multi-polarity, US strongest, *NK exists, dependent state*)
- competitive (China strongest, US offshore, disengaged, *NK exists, barely, unless US cuts deal as part of balancing*)
- cooperative (multiple strong states in a liberal concert, liberalized China, with or without US, *NK reforms or collapses*)

Bipolar:

- competitive blocs led by US and China (Asian Cold War, *NK grows most*)
- China-led group vs other Asia-led groups (not US, *NK exists, vassal state*)
- Sino-US condominium (cooperative, but distinct spheres of influence, *NK exists*)

Uni-polar:

- Chinese primacy excluding the US (new Middle Kingdom, *NK exists, tributary state*)

Source: D. Twining, "Global Trends 2030: Pathways for Asia's Strategic Future," December 10, 2012 at:

http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/12/10/global_trends_2030_pathways_for_asia_s_strategic_future

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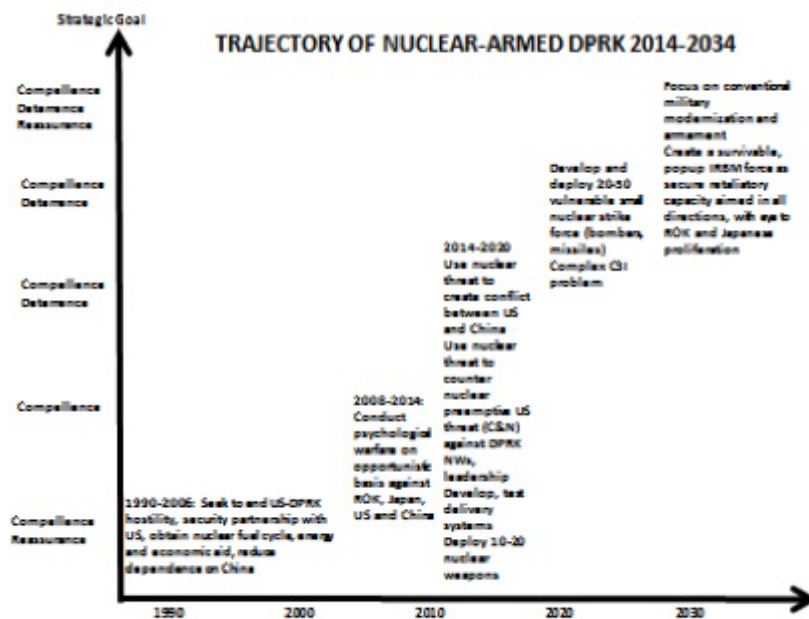
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In each of these seven conceivable orders in 2030, the DPRK survives, either barely as a dependent state on China, or exploiting the space created by great power dynamics.

The exception is in multipolar future in which the PRC has undergone a political transformation to a democratic state, and a regional order is constructed based on a concert of liberal, democratic states. In that order, it is possible that the DPRK reforms radically which leads to peaceful reunification, or it collapses internally and falls into the ROK's lap. Otherwise, in the other six multipolar, bipolar, and unipolar regional orders that the region could evolve into, the DPRK exists.

Thus, it would be prudent for the ROK to shape the strategic environment in which the DPRK makes its own strategic choices towards those regional orders that are most conducive to reducing and eliminating the DPRK nuclear threat, and to reducing and removing the threat of war from the Peninsula. By 2030, if left to its own nuclear devices, the DPRK could acquire a nuclear force of 200 nuclear weapons, and a bomber and missile force capable of delivering these weapons not only onto the ROK, but over intermediate range aimed at Japan, Guam, China, or Russia (see Figure 1). This is not an attractive prospect, not only because the DPRK would still not have a secure retaliatory capability against the threat of pre-emptive attack by the nuclear weapons states, creating an inherently unstable situation, but also because the ROK may proliferate its own nuclear force, creating an unstable nuclear standoff which might aptly be termed "mutual probable destruction." [6]

Figure 1: Trajectory of Nuclear-Armed Korea, 2014-2034



Although it is likely the only strategic framework in which the DPRK could denuclearize safely, and would present all regional states with an improved security environment, a comprehensive security settlement framework is only consistent with some of these regional orders—in particular, the “business-as-usual” competitive-cooperative order in which the US exercises leadership; the cooperative democratic liberal regional order (in which case, the DPRK nuclear problem may resolve itself via the disappearance of the DPRK as we know it); and a Sino-US condominium. The ROK should work hard with other states to ensure that the other four regional orders do not come to pass, as these pose increased, not reduced threat to the ROK from its most immediate and existential security threat, the DPRK.

To succeed, a comprehensive security settlement framework requires US leadership and a joint vision with all the states in the region, but most importantly, with China. It offers the US and China a common security objective that tough as it is, is achievable, whereas other regional security issues involving China (for example, the collision with Japan) are more intractable; and it offers an engagement opportunity for the US and China to work together in a way that provides diplomatic and other collaboration to match the military-led US rebalancing.

Although US leadership is critical, as a middle power, the ROK is well positioned not only to prompt the US to lead in this manner, but also to exploit its location in regional inter-state relationships to conceptualize and promote a comprehensive security settlement strategy with each of the key parties, and with other partners such as the EU, Mongolia, ASEAN states, and Australia.

7. REFERENCES

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[6] P. Hayes, "'Mutual Probable Destruction": Nuclear Next-Use in a Nuclear-Armed East Asia?", *NAPSNet Policy Forum*, May 14, 2014, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/mutual-probable-destruction-nuclear-next-use-in-a-nuclear-armed-east-asia/>

8. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSES

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