

Policy Forum 10-026: Requisites for North Korea's Denuclearization

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Requisites for North Korea's Denuclearization

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By Tong Kim

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I. Introduction

Tong Kim, Research Professor at Korea University and Adjunct Professor at SAIS Johns Hopkins University, writes, "If paranoid North Korea is assured of its security for survival and non-interference in its internal affairs, it will be open to serious discussions on denuclearization. The task

is how the U.S. and other partners can provide such assurances."

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II. Article by Tong Kim

- "Requisites for North Korea's Denuclearization"

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It has been a year since North Korea boycotted the six-party talks in reaction to the United Nations' punitive action against Pyongyang's rocket or missile launch. Since U.S. envoy Stephen Bosworth's visit to Pyongyang last December, Washington has shown no interest in talking to Pyongyang while waiting for its return to the six-party talks. Pyongyang has vowed not to return to the talks unless Washington commits to discussions on a peace treaty and lifting sanctions.

North Korea's foreign ministry statement on Jan. 11, 2010, calling for U.S. commitment to talks for a peace agreement, was a deliberate response to Bosworth's presentation of the U.S. position in Pyongyang, during which the North Koreans recognized the importance of the six-party talks. In addition to the discussion of a peace treaty, they also demanded lifting U.N. sanctions, which they said forced them to leave the talks. In short, North Korea was proposing a second direct meeting with the U.S. to discuss these issues as a step toward the resumption of multilateral talks.

Washington firmly rejected the North Korean offer, sticking to the waiting game of "strategic patience." Washington is still hoping for Pyongyang's return to the six-party talks framework, within which Washington would be willing to bilaterally or multilaterally address all the issues of concern to the North.

There is no prospect of an imminent breakthrough to the deadlock, except the wishful expectation that Pyongyang may soon flinch because of its insurmountable political and economic troubles at home. According to the latest scenario, which is favored in Washington and Seoul, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il would go to Beijing and announce his decision to return to the multilateral talks in return for China's pledge of further investment in the North and more economic aid to his destitute country. The question is not whether or when the North Korean leader will visit Beijing, but what he will say when he meets the Chinese leaders. Somehow, Washington always hopes for better Chinese cooperation -- to press or persuade the North to take steps toward the elimination of its nuclear weapons. There has been no evidence so far that Kim Jong-il has made up his mind to return to the talks, not to mention his intent to give up his nuclear weapons. More seriously, the North's return alone does not guarantee denuclearization.

The necessary conditions for the resumption of the six-party talks would require one of the following measures, if not any combination of at least two or more conditions listed below: (1) North Korea returns to the talks unconditionally, realizing the limits of its tolerance of domestic and international pressure; (2) the U.S., with the backing of the other participants -- China, South Korea, Japan and Russia -- directly engages the North to persuade it to trust the U.S. and convinces the North that its return to the talks would be in their self-interest; (3) an unlikely improvement of inter-Korean relations benefits North Korea in terms of economic recovery and political stability in the North, and the South contributes to the easing of the North's security concerns about its perceived threats from the U.S.; (4) a U.S. official of a higher level than Bosworth visits Pyongyang and assures Kim Jong-il of the genuine U.S. intent to work with the North; (5) a new inter-Korean summit is held to agree on a comprehensive road map to denuclearization; (6) China issues an ultimatum threatening to cut off

the lifeline to the North unless it returns to the talks.

Regarding the last condition mentioned above, it is doubtful that the recalcitrant North Koreans, who are imbued with a suicidal mentality from the blind cause of sovereignty and chauvinistic nationalism, would succumb to such Chinese pressure. China happens to be their reluctant choice to depend on for economic and strategic support in the absence of a better option. The North Koreans are well aware that the Chinese help them because of their own interests. The China-DPRK (North Korea) relationship is an alliance of strategic expediency.

China supports denuclearization because it does not want a destabilized Korean Peninsula. So far, the failure of multilateral efforts in denuclearization has not destabilized the region, though it may have increased tensions. Contrary to earlier concerns, neither Japan, South Korea nor Taiwan has opted to develop nuclear weapons, a credit to the U.S. nuclear umbrella in the region. China does not want the collapse of North Korea because it would threaten its strategic interests in keeping North Korea as a buffer that prevents U.S. troops from being deployed close to its border and to guard against potential flooding of North Korean refugees into China.

Seoul and Washington have a common approach to Pyongyang in their application of a two-track strategy of sanctions and dialogue. But they will not take the initiative to create the right political environment for a meaningful dialogue or improving relations with the North. China and Russia are certainly in favor of the six-party talks. China will continue to enjoy its status of the chair in the talks, and Russia will always be interested in reinstating its role in the region.

Even if the multilateral talks were to resume soon, they would be only the beginning of a long, thorny path to a final negotiated settlement. Yet, with an independent bilateral form excluded, for the right or the wrong reasons, there is something more Washington can and should do in order to lure the North back to the Beijing talks. Either through the Chinese or directly, Washington should convince Pyongyang that it is not waiting for Kim Jong-il's death or the collapse of his regime.

When the multilateral talks resume, all parties should first recommit themselves to the goal of the Sept. 19 joint statement of the six-party talks -- "verifiable denuclearization." The next step forward would be to go back to where they had ended in December 2008, namely the implementation phase of the Oct. 3, 2007 agreement on disablement and a declaration of North Korea's nuclear programs.

Since the breakdown of the talks last year, North Korea has reversed the disablement process to produce more plutonium and weaponize more of it. Given the extent of disablement and the economic difficulties constraining the use of Pyongyang's resources, the DPRK still needs more time to get its plutonium producing facilities operational again. Pyongyang also said it was conducting uranium enrichment tests.

The first agenda for the talks should be to receive an honest report from the North regarding the changes in the state of its nuclear programs, including the inventory of its nuclear stockpiles of bombs and fissile materials, as well as the extent of its progress in its uranium enrichment program. This time, the North Koreans would not be able to say that they never had a uranium enrichment program. Recently, they even said they would build a light water reactor using their indigenous fuel.

Given the magnitude and complexity of the North Korean problem, there is no silver bullet or a quick fix, no one-time "grand bargain" or "comprehensive" solution. New negotiations will have to refreeze and dismantle (instead of disable) the plutonium production facilities and prevent proliferation before moving to the final stage of eliminating the actual nuclear weapons. Unrestricted, transparent verification may not be feasible until mutual trust is built through a series of political and military measures, including the conclusion of a peace agreement and an improved domestic

situation in the North.

The denuclearization of North Korea may not be an urgent priority for Washington because: (1) the North's limited nuclear arsenal, without an effective delivery system, is not directly threatening the security of the U.S., whereas potential nuclear terrorism and Iran's nuclear development are more serious; (2) Washington maintains shared views and a comfort level of cooperation with Seoul and Tokyo in their approach to the North; (3) Obama does not want to be seen as "soft" or "weak" on North Korea, which is one of the worst proliferators of weapons of mass destruction; (4) there are indications, although not decisive, showing increasing instability in the North due to Kim's health problem, the succession process, and the impending prospect of bankruptcy from the failed currency reform and the impact of U.N. sanctions; and (5) even if a new agreement is reached with the current leadership of the North, implementation would be problematic as shown by experience, and there is no assurance that a successor regime would honor Kim's commitment, assuming complete denuclearization would take several years beyond the lifetime of Kim Jong-il.

As for the efficacy of sanctions, all pundits and experts agree that sanctions will not have full impact without China's aggressive participation. Hwang Jang-yop, the highest-ranking North Korean defector, recently told a Washington audience that North Korea will not collapse as long as China supports it. We still don't have convincing evidence for the likelihood of a North Korean collapse. The structural and political basis of Kim Jong-il's system still appears sound and viable.

Although any in-depth discussion of secretive North Korea largely depends on an academic exercise of speculation, the North Koreans are not inscrutable. Their fundamental strategy has been consistent in pursuing the protection of their independence, the survival of their system, and the improvement of their economy. However, their tactics have varied in their continuing attempt to achieve these goals, and their approach will shift or evolve again depending on the developing circumstances.

Time has proven that their utility of nuclear programs is not for negotiation. They see it as a security deterrent against the external threats, mainly from the U.S., which they accuse of maintaining a hostile policy toward them. Under "Songun" (military-first) politics, Pyongyang may believe that its possession of nuclear weapons may help maintain military unity and domestic order during the challenging course of succession and an economic revival.

The North Koreans now seem to believe that a peace agreement would provide more assurance than the normalization of diplomatic ties because it would end the technical state of war, and it should last unless or until its adversary wants to go to war again. On the other hand, a normalized diplomatic relationship would be subject to nullification by a unilateral notice by one side, as it sometimes happens in international relations. In other words, normalization could be only "a sheet of paper" that does not guarantee North Korea's security.

The North Korean leadership knows well that the best way to rebuild their economy is to take a path of opening and reform with the help of the international community, as China did. On the other hand, they have good reason to fear the consequences of opening and reform: a downfall of their centrally controlled socialist system by the uncontrollable forces of information and the free market. Without resolving the nuclear issue, they know they will have trouble inducing foreign investment and expanding trade with the outside world. This is the North Korean dilemma.

If paranoid North Korea is assured of its security for survival and non-interference in its internal affairs, it will be open to serious discussions on denuclearization. The task is how the U.S. and other partners can provide such assurances.

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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