Policy Forum 11-29: Russia’s Stake in a Denuclearized Korean Peninsula – Will the Ulan-Ude Summit Help?

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Russia’s Stake in a Denuclearized Korean Peninsula - Will the Ulan-Ude Summit Help?

By Georgy D. Toloraya

September 1st, 2011

Nautilus invites your contributions to this forum, including any responses to this report.

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I. Introduction

Georgy D. Toloraya, Professor of International Relations (Korean studies) and Director of Korean Research Programs at the Institute of Economics of Russian Academy of Science, analyzes the prospects for resumption of the Six Party Talks and discusses Russia's position on the Ulan-Ude Summit. He writes, "The first step is to freeze North Korea's missile and nuclear activities, then reduce the state's WMD arsenal. The chance to come back to the negotiating table should not be lost, and both President Obama and President Lee Myong-Bak should positively consider North Korean's proposal at the Ulan-Ude Summit. The resumption of talks would get full support from Russia."

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II. Article by Georgy D. Toloraya

-"Russia's Stake in a Denuclearized Korean Peninsula - Will the Ulan-Ude Summit Help?"
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The Korean nuclear issue is at a delicate point – while there has been a lot of contact between the six parties, the prospects for resuming the Six Party talks are dim. North Korea's new "charm offensive" has been met with skepticism in the West.[1] Could Kim Jong Il's visit to Russia bring the resumption of the diplomatic process any closer? Moscow really wants to see the talks resume. North Korea's continuing intransigence with weapons of mass destruction fuels conflict near Russian borders and creates friction between China and the US. This is an unwelcome development - Russia would not like to see any side flexing their military muscles in this sensitive area, where Russia's positions has considerably weakened in the post-Soviet era. Besides, Russia is interested in economic advancement in the East, including trilateral Russia-North Korea-South Korea projects. The much-discussed gas pipeline from Russia to ROK via the North made some progress as a result of the summit, but it would be impossible to implement unless inter-Korean relations improve. The project was addressed in even more detail during the subsequent meeting of the Russia-DPRK Intergovernmental Commission in Pyongyang last week, but so far South Korea has been skeptical of the project's feasibility because of its relationship with the North.[2]

Russia wishes to see a reduction in tensions and an early denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, but understands that North Korea simply cannot discard nuclear arms without a security guarantee. "Prior denuclearization", especially taking into account Gadaffi's fate, which Kim does not want to repeat, is a fantasy. So the first step is to stop further activities and the advancement of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. Only after the programs have been frozen can prospects for the reduction of North Korea's nuclear arsenal be put on the agenda.

Whether or not the talks start before the end of Obama's first term in office will largely determine their agenda. If not resumed now, the talks will probably have as a starting point a full-fledged North Korean uranium enrichment program, half-constructed new reactors (and maybe even a "thermonuclear problem"), as well as whatever advancements in missile technology North Korea can

develop in the year before the US and ROK elections.

The Ulan-Ude Summit was not supposed to be a breakthrough, but was an opportunity to move further down the road of Korean security discussions and increase Russia's input into the Korean nuclear issue. It turned out, however, that the security issues on the Korean peninsula (North-South confrontation and the nuclear issue) were central at the summit. For North Koreans this agenda was predominant; Kim Jong-il's entourage included mostly foreign policy-military cadres.

It should be remembered that Russian demands to resume the diplomatic process on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula were met with a positive response from North Korea in March (during Vice-Minister Alexey Borodavkin's visit).[3] Pyongyang publicly declared its readiness, not only to adhere to the basic agreements of the Six Party Talks, but also, for the first time, to discuss its Uranium enrichment program and consider accepting inspectors and declaring a moratorium on its nuclear and missile activities.[4] However, this signal was ignored by South Korea and the US and North Korea consequently questioned the "sincerity" of their commitment to negotiations.

At the Ulan-Ude Summit it was Kim Jong-il himself who declared that North Korea was ready to resume the Six Party Talks without any conditions and would consider a moratorium on nuclear tests and the production of nuclear materials.[5] He later repeated this pledge in China. This is as much as you can expect from North Korea – the unannounced moratorium is actually already in place, and the uranium enrichment discussion would need to start from scratch! At the same time, if the talks are not resumed now, we could see another nuclear test, the extraction of more plutonium, and uranium enrichment. Nevertheless, the response from both Washington and Seoul was "that is not enough." The US and South Korea stuck to their preconditions: allowing IAEA inspectors to return to North Korea to inspect the uranium enrichment program and stopping the manufacture and testing of nuclear weapons and missiles. According to Park Young Ho of the Korean Institute for National Unification, "by saying he will participate in the Six Party Talks without any prior conditions whatsoever, Kim Jong Il is showing his intention to force the governments of South Korea, the US and Japan back to the talks."[6] However, if such delicate issues should be solved as one sided demands before the talks, what are the talks for? The idea that North Korea needs the talks because of the worsening economic situation does not stand a qualified analysis – for Pyongyang, maintaining military leadership is much more important than the livelihood of population. If this signal by North Korea is ignored again, we should expect another round of brinkmanship from Pyongyang.

Of course, if the theory of the "imminent collapse" of North Korea is still believed (hence pressure and isolation from the ROK and "benign neglect" from the US), this pretext is as good as any to not resume negotiations. However, the North Korean regime shows no signs of collapsing. Kim Jong-Il's health has proved to be good enough for a lengthy journey with many friendly meetings, while his son's position has became strong enough for Kim Jong-Il to leave the management of the country in his hands for a week. Waiting for regime change is a dead-end strategy.

On the other hand, if the US-ROK position is just a bargaining chip to extract as much as possible from North Korea before resuming the talks, a positive outcome may follow and some kind of a compromise could be found. Russia is ready to assist this process. Goodwill should be shown on both sides, and North Korea has already made her move. The onus is on the US and ROK to take the next step. Hopefully some bilateral contact with the US and ROK will follow which, in accordance with

the Chinese three-stage plan, could lead to the resumption of the Six Party Talks. Russia now holds a more tangible stake in this process and, together with China, should persuade both Seoul and Washington to resume the negotiations, however distant the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula might seem.

I believe, however, that resumption of the Six Party Talks with the same framework as it originally had will not advance the goal of denuclearization. This is not to question if the new round should be based on the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement and the principles worked out during that period. Rather, the goal and mandate of the talks should include a security agenda. If the talks concentrate only on North Korean "denuclearization" (whatever that means), they will be fruitless. The issues of security guarantees for North Korea and a peace and security regime should be addressed. The first step is to freeze North Korea's missile and nuclear activities, then reduce the state's WMD arsenal. The chance to come back to the negotiating table should not be lost, and both President Obama and President Lee Myong-Bak should positively consider North Korean's proposal at the Ulan-Ude Summit. The resumption of talks would get full support from Russia.

III. References

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[3] "North Korea Ready to Discuss Uranium Program", Manila Bulletin¸April 15, 2011. Available online at: http://www.mb.com.ph/node/309503/n-korea-ready-di

[4] March 15, 2011 KCNA statement said: "The Russian side expressed its stand that the six-party talks should be resumed at an early date to settle the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula in a political and diplomatic manner. It pointed out that it is important to take constructive measures such as DPRK's moratorium on nuclear test and ballistic missile launch, access of IAEA experts to uranium enrichment facilities in the Nyongbyon area and discussion of the issue of uranium enrichment at the six-party talks.The DPRK side expressed its stand that it can go out to the six-party talks without any precondition, it is not opposed to the discussion of the above-said issue at the six-party talks and if the talks are resumed, other issues raised by the Russian side can be also discussed and settled in the course of implementing the September 19 Joint Statement calling for the denuclearization of the whole Korean Peninsula on the principle of simultaneous action." http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2011/201103/news15/20110315-21ee.html.

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