Seoul Should Call Pyongyang’s Bluff

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by Ralph A. Cossa

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I. Introduction

The following is a paper by Ralph A Cossa, president of the Pacific Forum CSIS a Honolulu-based non-profit research institute affiliated with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. Cossa writes: "North Korea's attempt to blame Seoul for the lack of progress in the six-party process is disingenuous and insulting. It's time to call Pyongyang's bluff.”

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II. Essay by Ralph A. Cossa

"Seoul Should Call Pyongyang's Bluff"
by Ralph A Cossa

"It's all South Korea's fault!" In a refreshing change from its natural tendency to blame Washington for all the world's

troubles, Pyongyang has recently announced that it cannot proceed with the six-party talks on defusing its clandestine nuclear-weapons programs since "the foundation for talks has been destroyed" as a result of Seoul's secret nuclear experiments.

The United States, of course, shares the blame, given its "double standards regarding the nuclear issue", but the primary blame has now apparently shifted from Washington to Seoul (conveniently bypassing Pyongyang, where the real problem continues to lie).

China has regrettably reinforced this argument by noting that the South's nuclear experiments have complicated the situation. In an attempt to get the talks back on track, Beijing has hinted that South Korea's nuclear transgressions could be discussed at the next round of talks; an idea that Seoul promptly (and I believe foolishly) rejected. Meanwhile, senior officials from all five of North Korea's interlocutors have called on Pyongyang to agree to another round of talks, even as many profess to see little prospect of success prior to the November US presidential elections. The six parties are North and South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the US.

Is all hope lost for another round of talks? I think not, especially if Seoul and Beijing are prepared to directly refute Pyongyang's foolish assertion and instead challenge the North to follow Seoul's example of (admittedly after-the-fact) transparency. Unfortunately, while South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and Russian President Vladimir Putin have publicly called on Pyongyang to resume the talks at their recent Moscow summit - a call echoed by senior officials from Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul at their latest Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) dialogue - none seems willing to press Pyongyang on the issue.

The big differences between South Korea's admitted transgressions and Pyongyang's indirectly acknowledged violations of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regulations is that it was Seoul itself that revealed its most recent illegal actions - taken by a small group of scientists without government sanction, some four years ago - and then it welcomed International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to investigate not only the 2,000 uranium-enrichment experiments but its long-canceled 1982 government-sponsored plutonium-based weapons program as well - a clandestine effort halted under US pressure, one should add.

Seoul has been disappointingly quiet in the face of the North's allegations - as it regrettably normally is - merely dismissing the charges and calling on the North to resume negotiations. A more appropriate approach would be to challenge Pyongyang to follow Seoul's example and invite the IAEA to investigate both sides' alleged transgressions, perhaps with representatives from both North and South accompanying each inspection effort.

North Korean officials reportedly told visiting British Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell that it could "never sit at the table to negotiate its nuclear weapon program unless truth about the secret nuclear experiments in South Korea is fully probed". Seoul should respond to this demand by offering to present a full briefing on its clandestine programs at the next round of talks, inviting a representative from the IAEA to come and share its findings as well. Seoul should then challenge Pyongyang to do the same.

Seoul's embarrassing revelations can provide a way out of the crisis for North Korea if it so chooses. If renegade scientists can be blamed for Seoul's transgressions, certainly they can be discovered (or manufactured) in the North. Diplomatic niceties (and a desire by all sides to move forward) would result in acceptance of almost any North Korean excuse if the end result was full disclosure by Pyongyang of its uranium- and plutonium-based programs.

If Seoul is prepared to lay its nuclear card on the table for all to see, then the next step is getting Pyongyang to the table to see them. Here again, some new thinking is needed to end the current game in which Pyongyang continues to hold out before each round until receiving sufficient "incentives" merely for attending. (Beijing reportedly has had to offer significant amounts of economic and energy assistance to get the North to previous meetings, including in one instance an agreement to build a glass manufacturing factory in honor of Dear Leader Kim Jong-il's birthday.)

President Roh should seize the initiative. He should ask Beijing to arrange another round of six-party talks for early October to allow Seoul to explain fully to the other participants the nature and extent of its past nuclear programs and the steps it is taking, including full cooperation with the IAEA, in order to ensure that they are verifiably ended. Beijing should then set a date for this meeting and invite all the other parties to participate, making it clear that the meeting will proceed as scheduled, even if not all participants choose to attend. This would put the pressure on Pyongyang to attend, rather than putting the pressure on Beijing to bribe it into to make another appearance.

North Korea's attempt to blame Seoul for the lack of progress in the six-party process is disingenuous and insulting.

It's time to call Pyongyang's bluff.

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