

Policy Forum 09-011: The DPRK-US Nuclear Game in the Obama Era

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The DPRK-US Nuclear Game in the Obama Era

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By Shen Dingli

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I. Introduction

Shen Dingli, Executive Dean of Institute of International Studies and Director, Center for American Studies at Fudan University, Shanghai, writes, "As the US would not accept the DPRK demand to unify the peninsula on its terms and, as the US still perceives political and military utility of its own

nuclear weapons, it is unrealistic to expect North Korea to disarm its nuclear weapons program in the first place, no matter which American president is in power."

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II. Article by Shen Dingli

- "The DPRK-US Nuclear Game in the Obama Era"

By Shen Dingli

At the outset, I will profess that I have no interest in justifying the DPRK moves to acquire and keep its nuclear weaponry, but I will try to understand the different ways the US and DPRK look at the issue, and suggest pessimistically why this issue still is unlikely to be resolved in Obama era. This is not my wish, but rather an expectation according to the logic.

It is understood that the change of US administration has opened some new opportunities to address the nuclear issue of North Korea and Iran. President Obama has made it clear that his government will talk to North Korea and Iran directly. This is certainly a better option than not to do so, as talks would at least add the chance of mutual understanding and reduce the chance of misperception.

But a better understanding of each other's interests may still not lead to the resolution of the nuclear issue and end with the DPRK's complete nuclear dismantlement. Given the utility of nuclear weapons in international politics presently, such talks would probably lead nowhere. America's purpose is to eliminate North Korea's nuclear wherewithal, but not its own nuclear weapons capability, through either bilateral talks or future rounds of the Six-Party talks.

The argument of trading North Korea's nuclear weapons for removing the US hostility, or even carrying this out in an action-for-action scheme, is questionable, depending upon the different perspectives and the perceived value of these two actions.

One may argue about who has threatened whom. On the US side, North Korea's way of governing has threatened its own people. Actually on a larger scale, any such authoritative regime would threaten the people where these systems apply. The DPRK's war of unification in 1950 could have threatened the way of life in ROK, so it was not acceptable and had to be stopped by America. The US has the mission to interrupt such military actions through its own political will and military strength to protect the "free world". In this sense, the nuclear capability North Korea has acquired would only add to the threat perception America has developed vis-à-vis the DPRK, as such capability could undercut American interests, even if it would be bound within the DPRK's territory.

In North Korea's perspective, unification of the Korean Peninsula remains its first priority. In its heart, the division of the peninsula is neither moral nor legal, and it has no intention of honoring it. Therefore, it has no regrets for having initiated a war of unification half a century ago. It was the US forces, in the name of the UN, that had frustrated the DPRK's ambition, so America has remained Pyongyang's arch enemy ever since.

While the US is asking the DPRK to dismantle its nuclear weapons program, North Korea would feel that America has not reached a level of abandoning its own nuclear deterrent, despite the fact that the US has the most powerful military in the world, and America's conventional armed force can virtually execute all missions that the US leadership would ever imagine.

Therefore, the US would not disarm its own nuclear arsenal, as its leadership would not view it as a

"white elephant" to be given away. Given its possession of nuclear weapons, America has had both a psychological superiority through deterrence, and, if that fails, a real chance to honor its threat when a political decision can be made.

In DPRK's view, as long as America continues to protect the ROK, making unification on North Korea's terms less likely, Washington poses a paramount threat. So America has both the intention and the capability to threaten Pyongyang. To counter these threats North Korea would need nuclear weapons for its ultimate security and once these weapons are obtained the DPRK is not going to give them up.

In this political interaction, it is virtually impossible for North Korea to denuclearize. Before Pyongyang tested its nuclear weapons in October 2006, there was still a theoretical possibility to freeze DPRK's nuclear status as a state without conducting a nuclear test. But after that nuclear blast it is not possible to revert to that "no-test-yet" status and highly unlikely to return to the previous level.

As the US would not accept the DPRK demand to unify the peninsula on its terms and, as the US still perceives political and military utility of its own nuclear weapons, it is unrealistic to expect North Korea to disarm its nuclear weapons program in the first place, no matter which American president is in power.

There is an argument that if the DPRK would keep its nuclear weapons, it will continue to face sanctions. Certainly, Pyongyang doesn't want to have sanctions against it. It also views such sanctions imperialist, as they don't respect the DPRK's sovereign rights to develop weapons for defense. As far as proliferation is concerned, North Korea could also ponder why America's development of nuclear weapons and space weapons would not have contributed to proliferation - pressuring other countries to follow suit.

For instance, pressed by America, China has developed nuclear weapons and may have an eye on the space dimension as well. So why only address proliferation of North Korea but not America's pressure on China? And, even if China has developed nuclear weapons given the US threat, has China's action destabilized Northeast Asia? Have Japan and South Korea followed suit? Beijing may fully consider that its development of nuclear weapons has stabilized, rather than destabilized, the regional security situation. South Korea and Chinese Taipei indeed attempted to launch their nuclear weapons program, clandestinely, due to America's inclination to withdraw from Asia to some extent, not out of concern of China's nuclear weapons.

As in the DPRK case, America would not buy the argument that it has threatened China. In return, Washington may feel that Beijing's one-party system has deprived some Chinese of political freedom, so China may have brought this insecurity on itself. But the Chinese government and at least most Chinese would not accept this perspective. They consider that the continuing US weapons sale to Taiwan has posed a major continuing security threat to Beijing. Even though China has implemented an opening-up policy for three decades and engaged America extensively, Beijing keeps alert on defense issues and would not foolishly abandon its nuclear weapons, given the present situation.

Also, American government would not unrealistically ask Beijing to give up its nuclear weapons now. Washington believes that nothing can entice China to do so - even ending weapons sale to Taiwan would not be enough. But that was not America's initial intent - in 1964, Washington considered a surgical operation on China's nascent nuclear weapons program. Eventually, China grew economically and was accepted militarily as an established nuclear weapons power, though at a medium level.

So why can't the DPRK follow China's suit? Given North Korea's threat perception and America's inability to help remove this perception, Pyongyang has acquired certain nuclear weapons capability. Once obtaining them, North Korea will keep it, despite various pressures - Pyongyang believes that its nuclear weapons support the country far more than the hardship they bring to it. It is true that China has joined other countries to persuade the DPRK to move toward nuclear disarmament. But China used to face threats from America and the former Soviet Union, plus natural disasters and a great famine in early 1960s and China still survived and flourished. Why can't the DPRK survive similarly, as Pyongyang's international environment today is better than that of China fifty years ago?

Also America tends to tacitly accept some of the outcomes of nuclear proliferation. It is true America doesn't accept nuclear weapons programs or suspected programs of Iraq, Iran, Libya and Syria, but it has not denied, or has not been denying wholeheartedly, those of China, Israel, India and Pakistan.

The whole world has observed that the conservative Bush government much improved its stance toward the DPRK after the latter conducted a nuclear test. North Korea believes that paperwork or an American security promise could be easily withdrawn at anytime and no one can ever guarantee that future American leadership, even if not President Obama, would not be harsh and aggressive toward the DPRK again. A realistic Pyongyang believes that only its own hard strength can protect itself and economic hardship will be muddled through eventually.

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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