

Policy Forum 09-069: The Way to Denuclearize North Korea

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The Way to Denuclearize North Korea

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By Wooksik Cheong

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I. Introduction

Wooksik Cheong, Representative of the Civil Network for a Peaceful Korea, writes, "If North Korea denuclearized it would lose its leverage to compel the US to fulfill the agreement. This is a fundamental asymmetry in the US-North Korea relationship. Once North Korea denuclearizes itself, the process will be very difficult to reverse. However, for the US, it is easy to change its policy toward a denuclearized North Korea."

II. Article by Wooksik Cheong

- "The Way to Denuclearize North Korea"

By Wooksik Cheong

After President Barack Obama took office, the administration's initial policy toward North Korea was to achieve "a complete and verifiable denuclearization." However after North Korea's second nuclear test in May, the administration added the word, "irreversible" to the phrase. The term, "complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization (CVID)," had previously been used by the Bush administration, until it was dropped due to North Korea's fierce opposition to the term. From the North's perspective the term implies a defeated nation and thus is not a goal that the North could ever agree to in a negotiation. The reemergence of the term 'CVID' implies that Obama administration is continuing the policy of the former government, regardless of the growing criticism of the diplomatic failures of the Bush administration.

There are understandable reasons why the administration brought out the term "irreversible" again. North Korea once promised to shutdown its nuclear facilities according to the 1994 Agreed Framework. But in 2003 North Korea resumed the production of weapons-grade plutonium and conducted a nuclear test in October 2006. Agreements signed at the six-party talks in February 13 and October 3, 2007 momentarily stopped the North Korean nuclear facilities from producing additional plutonium, but, once again, North Korea restarted the facilities and detonated its the second nuclear bomb in May.

It is thus understandable that the Obama administration is getting frustrated by North Korea's erratic behavior. The term "irreversible denuclearization" is a way to demonstrate that the United States will not continue to play the on again, off again game of nuclear blackmail.

However it should be acknowledged that US's commitment to its obligations under the nuclear agreements could also be considered "reversible". While the Agreed Framework was in effect the US expected to see the North Korean regime collapse, rather than to fulfill the its commitments under the agreement. The US and North Korea almost reached a settlement of the missile issue in the 2000 US-North Korea Joint Communiqué until the Bush administration canceled negotiations and identified North Korea as part of an "Axis of Evil" and a possible target for a preemptive strike. All these events happened prior to the second North Korean nuclear crisis in October of 2002.

The current situation seems to be very similar to what happened in Bush era. Both the US and South Korea agreed to commit troops in move into North Korea in case of emergency, citing Kim Jong-Il's health as a reason. However, this commitment is a violation of the September 2005 Joint Statement that the "US has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK with nuclear or conventional weapons". Also the UN Security Council's decision to condemn North Korea for what the North claims was a satellite launch for peaceful purposes could be considered a violation of the "spirit of mutual equality and respect" in the same agreement.

Just as US is skeptical of North Korea's fickle pattern of diplomacy, the North is very frustrated by unreliable US behavior. Consequently, North Korea has used its nuclear weapon program in three ways: a diplomatic card to make US to withdraw any hostile policy toward North Korea, an actual deterrent in case of the collapse of negotiations, and finally as a lever to force the US to enact the agreement.

If North Korea denuclearized it would lose its leverage to compel the US to fulfill the agreement. This is a fundamental asymmetry in the US-North Korea relationship. Once North Korea denuclearizes itself, the process will be very difficult to reverse. However, for the US, it is easy to

change its policy toward a denuclearized North Korea. History proves that international relations do not work based on faithful agreements, rather they are largely determined by a country's national interest.

This then demonstrates why it is so difficult to find a complete solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis. It also implies that not only the US, but also the international community, needs to assure North Korea of its irreversible support in return for denuclearization. And regardless of what form that assurance takes, be it a normalization of the US-North Korean relationship, a peace treaty to end the Korean War, or a massive amount of aid to North Korea, the core principle of these measures cannot be reversible.

Thus, the US must be creative and bold to remove the discrepancies between the different interests of the nations. First of all there must be no discord between the words and actions of any agreement. US should fulfill the agreement faithfully. This means if the agreement commits the United States to neither attack North Korea nor treat it in a discriminatory manner, then the US should neither explore "Contingency Plans" nor prohibit North Korea from launching a satellite for peaceful purposes. The missile negotiations in the Clinton administration tell us that there is a way to resolve the dilemma of North Korea's ballistic missiles and its demands for a satellite.

Second, the US should demonstrate that it does not have a hostile policy toward North Korea and take clear steps to reduce tensions on the peninsula in tandem with North Korea's denuclearization efforts. For example, the US could restart the construction of a light-water nuclear reactor or take steps to reduce or abolish the US-South Korea military exercises.

Last, but not least, the US and North Korea need to build a solid trust between top level officials. Considering the peculiar structure of North Korea, the asymmetry between the denuclearization and corresponding measures can be mollified through a communication between the top leaders. This means that Mr. Obama must arrange a meeting with Kim Jong-Il in an appropriate time.

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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