Policy Forum 11-004: Time to Shift from Tension to Talks

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Time to Shift from Tension to Talks

Policy Forum, January 27, 2011

Tong Kim

CONTENTS

I. Introduction

Tong Kim, visiting professor at the University of North Korean Studies and adjunct professor at SAIS Johns Hopkins University, writes, “The beginning of this year brings a new momentum for resuming

talks with North Korea. Talks, if held, will be about avoiding provocations, keeping peace and stability, improving inter-Korean relations, and ultimately dismantling North Korea's nuclear programs. We don't know whether this rare momentum will be harnessed for a breakthrough, or if it will be left to wither away. However, this momentum did not come out of the blue."

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II. Article by Tong Kim

-" Time to Shift from Tension to Talks"

By Tong Kim

It is far more comforting to talk about talks than to discuss the dangers of war on the Korean Peninsula. Last year was full of tensions and confrontations between the North and South, which culminated in the sinking of the Cheonan ship by an alleged North Korean torpedo, an exchange of artillery fire over Yeonpyeong Island and an ensuing escalation of readiness for war.

The beginning of this year brings a new momentum for resuming talks with North Korea. Talks, if held, will be about avoiding provocations, keeping peace and stability, improving inter-Korean relations, and ultimately dismantling North Korea's nuclear programs. We don't know whether this rare momentum will be harnessed for a breakthrough, or if it will be left to wither away. However, this momentum did not come out of the blue.

Perhaps the tipping point from tension to talks was reached when the North chose not to fire back—contrary to its dire warnings of a nuclear war—in response to the December 20th live fire drills by South Korean forces. The South had nonetheless continued its intense military exercises to demonstrate its ability to retaliate against future provocations by the North. These drills caused concerns in Beijing and Washington that the South might be foolhardy in militarily confronting the unpredictable North.

A crack in Seoul's posture appeared when President Lee Myung-bak made conflicting comments on North Korea during his year-end reports to the Ministries of Unification and Foreign Affairs. At this point Lee may have concluded that he had adequately addressed public calls for a stronger posture against North Korean provocation, but realized that resolute security alone would not be enough to resolve the North Korean issue.

However, some of Lee's statements deserve further consideration: "There should not always be military confrontation between the North and South. We should also work for the settlement of peace through inter-Korean dialogue." (Dec. 29 to the Unification Minister) "We should not be discussing unification by absorption. The North Korean nuclear issue should be resolved through the Six-Party Talks during the year 2011, because North Korea aims at becoming a 'strong and prosperous nation' in 2012… Judging from the Yeonpyeong incident, unification is a distant story." (Dec. 29 to the Foreign Minister)

Even with the positive spin of these statements, the Lee government is still seen as shunning genuine dialogue with the North Korean regime. President Lee's ministers and advisors are determined to wait for an eventual collapse of the Kim royal family and a "peaceful democratic unification," for which Lee urges his people to work toward with neighboring countries China and Russia. The Unification Ministry said it plans to work "with the people in the North to precipitate the process of unification", meaning to turn them against the Kim Jong Il regime. Given the strict surveillance system of North Korean society, few believe this strategy will work. George W. Bush had rhetorically tried to differentiate the North Korean people from their rulers, but that only produced an adverse impact on U.S. negotiations with the North Korean government.

In his New Year address on January 3rd, the president told the North that the path to dialogue and peace is "still open." He urged the North to give up "nuclear weapons and military adventurism" and to "work toward peace and cooperation not just in rhetoric but also in action." This mixed signal came two days after Pyongyang called for an end to confrontation and dialogue through a New Year's joint editorial of three major North Korean newspapers.

On January 5th Pyongyang issued a more aggressive joint statement proposing holding unconditional talks with Seoul in the name of the DPRK government, the Workers' Party and other organizations. The North called for "an unconditional and early opening of talks between the authorities having real power and responsibilities." The North Koreans "are ready to meet anyone anytime and anywhere." According to the statement, they want to conduct "positive dialogue and negotiations with the political parties and organizations of South Korea including its authorities, be they authorities or civilians, ruling parties or opposition parties, progressives or conservatives." However, the statement made no mention of the Cheonan or Yeonpyeong incidents.

What stands in the way to talks now is a question of how to define North Korea's "sincerity." All parties, with the exception of North Korea, seem to agree that any resumption of the Six-Party Talks must be preceded by an improved inter-Korean relationship. Seoul has held the position that talks are moot unless the North Koreans are "genuinely sincere." Other than that there are no agreed upon set of preconditions for resuming talks with the North, although there has been a lot of talk about possible requirements, including stopping provocations, suspending all uranium enrichment and other nuclear activities, inviting back IAEA inspectors and a credible demonstration of commitment to the September 19th Joint Statement.

For whatever reason, North Korea has dropped its own conditions to the resumption of the Six Party Talks by keeping silent on its previous demands for the lifting of UN sanctions and a U.S. commitment to discuss a peace treaty. The North Koreans might think it is the South's "sincerity" that is questionable. Once the Six-Party Talks are resumed, the North is most likely to insist upon its right to a nuclear state and to develop a uranium enrichment program for peaceful purposes. The North still insists that its position on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula has not changed. The problem is that few people today believe that the North will negotiate away its nuclear weapons. So the question then is: what do we negotiate for? There are some pragmatic views that even a limited settlement to freeze and contain Pyongyang's program from expansion and proliferation would be worth trying. For example Ferial Saeed, a State Department official, wrote a paper to argue for the usefulness of "A Nuclear Pause" while she was assigned to the National Defense University last year,

Conservative skeptics and supporters of the Lee government want to discard the latest North Korean overtures as a typical peace offensive that follows provocative brinksmanship. They warn that the latest North Korean offer of unconditional talks is a calculated strategy that intends: (1) to portray the South as the party causing instability; (2) to drive a wedge between the South and the United States; (3) to exacerbate internal bickering in the South; (4) to extricate itself from the condemnation for its provocations; and possibly (5) to move on with its domestic agenda for the completion of succession and for the 100th birthday of its founder Kim Il Song in 2012,(which would be difficult if not impossible to achieve without improved relations with the South and economic assistance from the South).

The skeptics do not completely rule out the utility of dialogue. Nevertheless, they do not believe Seoul should respond to Pyongyang's call, unless Pyongyang apologizes for the sinking of the Cheonan ship and the Yeonpyeong Island incident. In their view, North Korea should be punished, not rewarded with talks and assistance for its bad behavior. Yet, some of them argue that the Lee government must carry out a skillfully balanced, reenergized two-track policy of confrontation and dialogue.

Progressive critics of President Lee's North Korea policy welcome Pyongyang's offer for talks, as they believe: (1) dialogue can diffuse the tension and help prevent further deterioration of the security situation; (2) there has reemerged a loose international consensus that the North Korean issue should be resolved through dialogue; (3) the six-party talks may be resumed against or regardless of Seoul's position—the government could be left out of the process of starting the talks by the powerful dynamics of super-powers' interests; (4) Koreans on both sides must take an initiative in the resolution of their own issues to create the most favorable environment for international cooperation; and (5) the Lee government should stop its hostile policy—which has only

brought the inter-Korean relationship to its lowest point in the past 20 years—and go back to the engagement policy of the past governments of Roh Tae Woo, Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun. However, the critics also condemn North Korea's provocation, especially the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island that killed four people and was the first outright territorial attack on the South since the Korean armistice. On the other hand, they support suspension of mutual slander and recognition of each other's systems as agreed in a series of historic documents including the July 4th joint statement of 1972, the Basic North and South Agreement of 1991, and the two summit agreements of 2000 and 2007. They argue that the South should not expect good behavior by the North while taking a hostile attitude against it.

The first week of January was a busy week for the other countries concerned as well—the United States, China and Japan. The U.S. top North Korea policy representative, Steve Bosworth, was in Seoul, Beijing and Tokyo to discuss what it would take to restart the multilateral talks on North Korea's nuclear programs. In Washington, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with her counterparts from Beijing and Tokyo. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates visited Beijing and President Barack Obama met with Chinese President Hu Jin Tao on January 19 in Washington. North Korea continues to be an important topic of discussion for all these meetings. While Obama and Hu Jin Tao did not agree on specific conditions for talks, they did agree on a broad, general commitment path to denuclearization and the Six Party Talks.

As the current century moves towards what may be called an era of influence sharing or shared leadership between the United States and China in global affairs, particularly in Northeast Asia, the two Koreas, Japan and Russia will be more accurate to how the two giants may cooperate in the region. There is no question that the United States will remain the world's most powerful nation in terms of economic and military power for the foreseeable future. We don't have to be overly concerned about some pessimistic forecasts of a speedy American decline. Nor should we be content with a wishful, optimistic outlook of a durable American Century. What we know is that China has more influence today than before and the United States has less influence today than before in Northeast Asia.

It is understandable that Washington does not want to undermine its strategic relations with its allies in South Korea and Japan over the issue of North Korean nuclear programs. Washington does not seem to have decided whether to keep or change its ineffective policy of waiting or "strategic patience." The countries in the region do not wish to see a revival of the old Cold War divide between the camp of the United States and its two major allies and the opposing camp of China and North Korea, joined by Russia.

There are several bilateral issues between these countries, which complicate the multilateral task of dealing with North Korea. The issue of North Korea imposes a common challenge for the six parties concerned. Inter-Korean cooperation remains a prerequisite to any successful negotiation. In this context, the Obama administration should seriously consider some measures to nudge the Seoul government towards dialogue with the North. China appears to have done its part on North Korea. Dialogue with the North Koreans is not an award for their bad behavior. And anyway, it is better to talk about talks than to talk about war on the Korean Peninsula.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

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