

**U.S.-DPRK STRUCTURAL CONFLICTS:  
From a DPRK Nuclear Issue to a North Korea Problem**

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The chances are slim that the Six Party Talks aimed at finding a solution to the DPRK nuclear issue will reopen anytime soon. Even if they did, there is reason to doubt whether a meaningful solution could be reached. The outlook is bleak, as it is not just the nuclear issue, but the inclusion of the so-called “North Korea problem” that further complicates the standoff between the United States and the DPRK. Washington’s coercive policy of North Korean regime transformation has now extended past the nuclear issue to include the “problems” of North Korean counterfeiting of U.S. currency (i.e., “supernotes”), human rights, drug trafficking, and a variety of other issues. As the United States pursues the “DPRK nuclear issue” and the “North Korea problem” simultaneously, tensions between Washington and Pyongyang will continue to deteriorate.

In the eyes of the U.S., abiding by the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement that was reached at the fourth round of Six Party Talks prevents the North Korean issue from worsening. Maintaining the current condition is important, as Iran’s nuclear ambitions, the emergence of a Hamas government in Palestine, and other Middle Eastern issues seem to have taken center stage in U.S. foreign policy. While managing the DPRK nuclear issue with the joint statement, the United States has also opted to simultaneously apply pressure on the North, an approach that falls in line with the proclaimed U.S. national interest of spreading democracy around the globe. While proceeding within the framework of the joint statement, the U.S. position is that pressure will contribute to the transformation of the North Korean system. Recently, by strengthening financial sanctions against North Korea while separating the counterfeiting issue from the nuclear issue, the United States is demonstrating that it can tackle issues very effectively.

In addition, the Bush administration also appears to be employing various measures regarding the North Korean human rights issue, an issue which could be said to be at the center of pressure to transform the DPRK structure. Face-to-face meetings between President Bush and the family of a North Korean defector, and acceptance of the application for asylum of other DPRK refugees are being exploited so that the United States can take a stronger stance regarding human rights issues. Other hard-line measures are being employed as well. Jay Leftkowitz, U.S. Special Envoy on North Korean Human Rights, publicly criticized the South Korean government's investment in the inter-Korean Kaesong Industrial Complex as negatively affecting North Korean human rights. Practically speaking, this can be viewed as financial sanctions against the North as it raises the question of blocking South Korean investment into the project. Thus it is through a variety of measures and a number of fronts that the United States is attempting to pressure the North into transforming itself.

In response, North Korea has attempted to play the Six-Party-Talks-card to demand a lifting of financial sanctions. Thus far, this approach has failed to persuade Washington. The meeting between Kim Kye Kwan and Christopher Hill in Beijing last January, as well as DPRK Defense Minister Lee Jun's visit to the United States in March, and the meeting of six-party negotiators in Japan this past April did not convince Washington to change its policy. Even Kim Jong Il's unexpected visit to China, where he showed an apparent willingness to deal with the nuclear issue separately, failed to change the U.S. position. And despite the apparent North Korean flexibility on the counterfeiting issue, the U.S. does not appear willing to accept the North's proposed compromise. It now appears likely that Pyongyang will not wait for a solution to the nuclear issue or a realignment of the U.S.-DPRK relationship, and instead will attempt to "wait out" the incumbent Bush administration.

Viewed as such, the current U.S.-DPRK standoff becomes comparatively more serious than the stalemated six-party process. Last year, direct contact between U.S. and DPRK officials lead

to a breakthrough. Recently, however, fundamental tensions between the two have not eased despite the meeting of high-level officials from each side. U.S. pressure on the North based on a U.S. policy of regime transformation, coupled with Pyongyang's intent to ride out the pressure until the administration in Washington changes, leaves neither party with room for concession.

How can this situation be resolved? Before laying blame, North Korea must make a practical move to ease tensions; if it does not, the DPRK nuclear issue may fall into long-term stagnation. Also, South Korea must try to convince the United States to give up trying to force regime transformation in the North -- "convince" being the operative word, for Seoul does not possess the influence to "demand" this of Washington.

Yet a quicker road toward resolution of the issues is to convince the North to concede to U.S. demands. With the firm policy stance of the United States, Seoul must explain to Pyongyang that if North Korea does not show a genuine desire to resolve the nuclear issue, the United States will see fit to press for far-reaching reform in order to effect regime transformation. As tensions with the United States become more long-term, maintenance of inter-Korean relations becomes more important, putting South Korea in a more favorable position to voice demands to the North. South Korea needs to gather its strength and wits in order to push the North to avoid actions that would give the United States reasons to push for regime transformation. For this task, an inter-Korean summit may be needed.

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