

NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR TEST AND THE OUTLOOK FOR INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS

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The North Korean nuclear test conducted in October 2006 has thrown inter-Korean relations into a major crisis. One year after the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks concluded in 2005, the two Koreas and the U.S. once again find themselves in a labyrinth with no easy way out. The future of the two enterprises that have symbolized the progress of inter-Korean relations, the Keumgang Mountain tourism project and the industrial park at Kaesong, is hanging in the balance. The nuclear test demonstrated the limitations on developing ties between the two Koreas in the absence of the normalization of DPRK-U.S. relations. At the same time, it revealed the limited influence of inter-Korean relations on the improvement of relations between North Korea and the United States. The test, however, should not be considered a failure of South Korea's sunshine policy or its efforts to solve the nuclear issue by engaging the North. In any case, the nuclear test will strongly influence not only DPRK-U.S. relations but also the sphere of international relations in Northeast Asia, including ROK-U.S. ties and the Six-Party Talks. Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that inter-Korean relations will improve in the near term.

Between the two Koreas, the atmosphere of reconciliation and cooperation has subsided, and the Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula has been

nullified. Domestically, controversy has broken out over whether the sunshine policy has failed, intensifying the conflict within South Korean society. It will be difficult for the South, which in light of the nuclear test must depend on American deterrence, to stand on equal footing with the United States in their negotiations over the Free Trade Agreement and the revision of their alliance. This dependence on the United States is connected to the diminishing of South Korea's autonomy in dealing with the North. As a result, if there is no breakthrough on the nuclear issue, then North and South Korea will most likely be unable to negotiate the current impasse within the next year. The future progress of relations between the two Koreas is closely linked to how the nuclear issue and DPRK-U.S. relations will unfold. This means that there is little room for the independent development of inter-Korean relations or for finding an easy exit from the nuclear crisis.

The course of events in the wake of the nuclear test, in greatly simplified terms, is contingent upon the choices of America and North Korea. That is, America will either seek to find a solution (A1) or increase the level of pressure on North Korea (A2). North Korea will either choose to settle (N1) or resist international and especially American pressure on all fronts (N2). The scenario on the Korean peninsula will change according to these choices.

Figure 1. Possible Scenarios of the Nuclear Issue

A1, N1	A1, N2
A2, N1	A2, N2

In response to increasing American pressure (A2), North Korea has sent a strong N2 signal with the nuclear test, effectively throwing the ball into America's court. If the U.S. chooses the path of A1, it is extremely unlikely that North Korea will respond with N2; similarly if the former chooses A2 the latter will not react with N1. Therefore scenarios II and III are not realistic outcomes. If both nations refuse to yield or compromise and continue to butt heads, as represented by scenario IV, then inter-Korean relations will unavoidably regress or worsen, rather than simply continuing in a stalemate. Furthermore, in the event that North Korea conducts another nuclear or long-range missile test and America responds by more firmly pursuing a policy of pressure, then the platform of the sunshine policy will be further weakened. In the near term, North Korea will naturally attach greater weight to its foreign policy strategy and consider any improvement in inter-Korean relations to be a burden rather than a gain. Under these conditions, even the slightest progress in relations, such as restarting the provision of rice and fertilizer, will be difficult to achieve. It is also possible that the future of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and tourism at Keumgang Mountain will be placed in jeopardy. The failure of both of these projects could bring

about worsened relations and increased tension on the peninsula.

In the case of scenario IV, it is inevitable that inter-Korean relations will worsen in the coming year, whether due to the imposition of stronger sanctions, an additional nuclear test, or Proliferation Security Initiative drills specifically targeted at North Korea. In this scenario, however, how likely is it that North Korea will surrender, giving up its nuclear program and returning to the Six-Party Talks? As indicated above, this is a practically impossible outcome. America is free to respond to North Korea's N2 with either A1 or A2, but North Korea can only respond to America's A2 with N2. Therefore, even if its economy is seriously affected by sanctions and international pressure, North Korea will choose the path of the so-called "arduous march," rather than yielding or submitting first. This is unlikely to change even if China and South Korea actively participate in economic sanctions against the North. In the absence of any yielding on America's part, North Korea is more likely to respond strongly and up the bar with a do-or-die resistance or suicide strategy. As indicated by Pak Gil-yon, the North Korean ambassador to the UN, North Korea's intention to strengthen its nuclear and missile capabilities as America intensifies its strategy of isolation is not empty rhetoric.

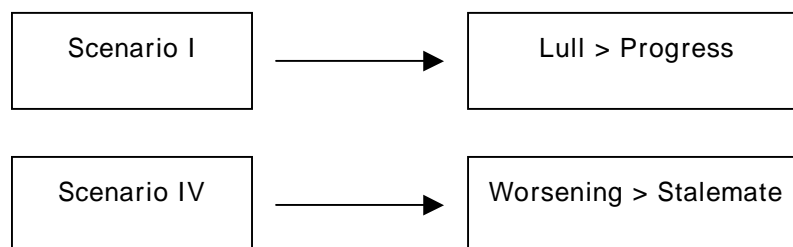
It is highly possible that America's hard-line policy on North Korea will ultimately end in failure. That pressure and sanctions alone will not solve the current crisis is attested to by the first nuclear crisis and the reality of North Korea's situation. Moreover, public opinion not only in America but also around the world perceives the nuclear test as a failure of the Republican Party's foreign policy. If the American midterm

elections in November 2006 result in a Democratic majority in Congress, there will be a greater push for dialogue with the North. Seen in this light, the state of tension induced by the nuclear test cannot but return to a state of negotiation as represented by scenario I. In fact, the history of U.S.-DPRK relations shows a repeated pattern of periods of tension followed by negotiations that are brought about by either unilateral or reciprocal yielding. The only question is the timing, opening, and the results of the negotiations.

Based on scenario I, it would be unwise for South Korea to actively participate in the sanctions or to change its fundamental policy toward the North, in spite of the current deadlock in inter-Korean relations and the significant restrictions on the sunshine policy's implementation. This is because South Korea could once again be left out in the cold if North Korea and the U.S. return to negotiations, as occurred during the Kim Young-sam administration. It is necessary to maintain a long-term perspective in managing inter-Korean relations. However, even under scenario I, it is unrealistic to expect that relations on the Korean peninsula will be revitalized in 2007 through the resumption of inter-ministerial talks, meetings of separated family members, a test run of the inter-Korean railroad, or a second summit meeting. In particular, an unprecedented political and social rift in South Korean society may deepen because of next year's presidential election, in which the goals and methods of North Korea policy are sure to be hotly debated issues. Whether events unfold according to scenario I or IV, the North Korea variable is likely to be a chief issue in the election. If public opinion splits into two camps—one for cooperating with North Korea on the basis of common ethnicity, and the other for cooperating with the international community—

then the social base for developing inter-Korean relations will weaken and the ability to mobilize resources will also be limited. North Korea will either act to influence this division or wait until the next presidential term begins, adjusting the scope and speed of inter-Korean relations and merely observing for the time being. In scenario I, inter-Korean relations will not manifest any significant progress and instead will most likely maintain the lull.

Figure 2. The Prospect for Inter-Korean Relations



In essence, America must first change its policy in order for the North Korean nuclear issue to be resolved. It will be difficult to find any solution if America is not willing to yield; therefore the U.S. should use an A1 response as an opportunity to seek compromise through reciprocal concessions. The relevant parties must work towards a solution by picking up where the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks left off. In this process, the extent to which China actively seeks to serve as a mediator and whether or not it is successful, in addition to South Korea's diplomatic efforts, will be important. Furthermore, the international community should persuade and pressure not only North Korea but also America to change its policies. The role of the South Korean government and inter-Korean relations, however, will be more important after the reopening of talks, not before.

The crisis created by the nuclear test may be marked by many vicissitudes, but it will eventually enter a negotiation phase once again. However, this is not the end of the issue. As evidenced by the tug of war over North Korea's nuclear program over the past ten-plus years, this is not an issue that can be settled in a short period of time. The pattern of face-off followed by negotiation followed by face-off will continue to repeat until the DPRK and U.S. normalize relations and a peaceful order is established on the Korean peninsula. Indeed, the same thing can be said for inter-Korean relations, which are closely linked to DPRK-U.S. relations. This is the reality of international politics on the peninsula, in which the nuclear issue is entangled. Although DPRK-U.S. relations exert an immense influence on inter-Korean ties, any improvement in the former does not automatically guarantee development of the latter. This is why South Korea must carefully consider its role and its stake, which are necessary conditions for the development of inter-Korean relations.

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