

KEEPING THE PEACE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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INTRODUCTION

Although, or perhaps because, the Korean War ended in an armistice that has yet to be replaced by a peace treaty, the passage of over a half century has failed to banish the dark cloud of war from the Peninsula once and for all. If there is peace on the Peninsula nonetheless, it is but a fragile one. Since the emergence of a standoff over North Korea's nuclear weapons development program two years ago, the second of its kind since the early 1990s, however, peace on the Peninsula has become measurably more precarious.

This is due in part to the apparent increase in the North's nuclear capability and in part to the possibility that the standoff may escalate to the use of force leading ineluctably to a war. If the North's claim that it now possesses a "nuclear deterrent" is to be believed, then the magnitude of threat is patently greater today than it was a decade ago. The threat consists not only of the possibility that Pyongyang may actually use nuclear devices but also of enhanced opportunities for proliferation--through sales of nuclear material and even weapons to "rogue" states or terrorist groups.

Should the six-party process that was inaugurated in Beijing in August 2003 fail to make notable headway soon, moreover, there is a palpable danger that diplomacy will be replaced by forcible measures. The latter include, in an ascending order of severity, (1) economic sanctions, (2) interdiction of vessels and aircraft to and from North Korea, and (3) preemptive strikes against nuclear installations, both known and suspected, in the North.

Even the mildest of these options, however, carries the risk of precipitating forcible counter-measures from the North, which has repeatedly equated economic sanctions with a declaration of war. Pyongyang's warning cannot be brushed aside as a mere bluff, for it may well turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. For not only does Pyongyang have the capability to lash out against South Korea and beyond, but it has a well-known track record of resorting to force against the South. Pyongyang's forcible response to sanctions,

should it materialize, may well ignite the fuse of war. Needless to say, the other options have a much higher probability of doing so.

In order to forestall such frightening scenarios, then, we must leave no stones unturned in our multilateral quest for a peaceful resolution of the nuclear standoff. An obvious prerequisite is the resumption of the stalled six-party talks at the earliest possible date. Once a fourth round of the talks is convened, the two principal protagonists, the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), need to show more flexibility than they have in the previous three rounds. The remaining four parties--China, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Japan, and Russia--must do their part in inducing such an outcome.

RESUMING SIX-PARTY TALKS

After meeting separately with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Hu Jintao, Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, and ROK President Roh Moo Hyun on the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Santiago, Chile, on November 20, U.S. President George W. Bush stated that "the will is strong, that the effort is united and the message is clear to Mr. Kim Jong Il: Get rid of your nuclear weapons programs."¹ The top leaders of all the participants in the six-party talks except the DPRK, in other words, agreed on the goal of a nuclear-weapons free Korean Peninsula. They further agreed on the means with which to realize their common objective--the six-party talks.

It will be naïve to believe, however, that such unity of purpose among the leaders of Pyongyang's neighbors and their collective pleas will suffice in jump-starting the stalled multilateral negotiations. The North clings to the position that whether or not the six-party talks will be resumed hinges primarily on U.S. policy--that is, whether or not the United States will make clear its willingness to jettison its "hostile" policy toward the DPRK, which Pyongyang says entails a willingness to "co-exist in peace" with the North as well as an acceptance of the principles of "words for words" and "action for action" in regard to the nuclear issue.²

Although, in his sessions with Putin, Hu, Koizumi, and Roh, Bush reportedly "hinted he would show 'some flexibility' in offering incentives to the North," a "senior American official" made it clear that "that could only happen *after* North Korea returned to the negotiating table."³ Does this mean that the only way the six-party talks can be resuscitated is for the North to withdraw its preconditions? Actually, one can argue that the North's demand has been partially met. By repeatedly disavowing any intention to

attack the North and by reaffirming his commitment to a peaceful resolution of the standoff with the North, Bush has already embraced the principle of “peaceful co-existence” with the DPRK. Pyongyang’s demand for acceptance of the principles of “words for words” and “action for action,” on the other hand, is a different matter. It is something that, from Washington’s perspective, can only be considered after, not before, the North returns to the conference table.

Can the North, then, be persuaded to accept the reality--that the Bush administration’s North Korea policy is not as “hostile” as Pyongyang perceives, that the former will never accept Pyongyang’s formula for resolving the nuclear dispute before a fourth round of the six-party talks is held, and that it is in Pyongyang’s best interests to return to the negotiating table? The answer, in my view, is yes. And, although all four participants in the talks, with whose leaders Bush conferred at the APEC summit in Santiago, Chile, can and must play a role in inducing Pyongyang to become more flexible, no other country can be as influential as China.

Several factors give China both high stakes in the outcome of the nuclear standoff and considerable leverage over the North. First, China is the only country that has an on-going military alliance with the DPRK, and vice versa; a 1961 “treaty of friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance” calls for assisting each other “with all means at its disposal” in the event of external attack. Additionally, as the most important source of food and fuel aid to the North, China is Pyongyang’s virtual “life-line.”

Second, China has a huge stake in preventing the North from becoming a nuclear weapons state. Among other things, such a development can trigger a domino effect, providing incentives or pretexts to other Asian states, notably, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, to follow suit. It is a nightmare scenario for Beijing.

Third, should an armed conflict occur on the Korean Peninsula, China would be forced to make a decision on whether to honor its treaty commitments to the North. Even if China should decide not to do so, it is certain to pay a high price in the form of disrupted economic development.

Finally, China has invested considerable energy and reputation in the six-party talks, which it not only helped to make happen but also hosted on three consecutive occasions. In so doing China has managed to raise its diplomatic profile in the world arena markedly and to win praise and gratitude from all the other participants in the talks except the North. China, therefore, has a high stake in preventing the six-party process from collapsing and in leading it to a successful conclusion.

During their bilateral meeting in Santiago, Chile, Bush and Hu Jintao agreed on the value of the six-party talks. Bush told Hu that they “offer an opportunity for the major powers in the region to speak with one voice to North Korea about eliminating its nuclear weapons program.” Hu “reiterated China’s core position that there should be no nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula; that the six-party talks is the right forum to address this issue and that this won’t change.” He further explained that, “China is talking with the North Koreans to make it clear to them that it’s in their interests to come back to the six-party talks and address this issue.”⁴

Given all this, I am cautiously optimistic that China will ultimately succeed in persuading its long-time ally to return to the multilateral forum, of which China is most likely to remain the host. If Pyongyang’s boycott of a fourth round of the six-party talks in September bespoke its “strategy to run out the clock”--that is, to wait for the outcome of the November 2nd U.S. presidential election--, then Pyongyang must realize that the strategy “doesn’t work anymore and that they had to get serious.”⁵

MAKING PROGRESS IN SIX-PARTY TALKS

Resumption of the six-party talks, however, will signal not a breakthrough but merely a return to a bumpy road of difficult, contentious, and perhaps protracted negotiations. Both formal sessions and informal bilateral contacts will occur, and of the latter U.S.-DPRK contacts will be most important. What does each side need to do to break the impasse?

The U.S. actually put a proposal on the table at the third round of the talks held in Beijing from June 23 to 26, which, according to a “senior [Bush] administration official,” “has all the right ingredients.”⁶ Under the proposal, the DPRK would be required to (1) “fully disclose its nuclear activities,” (2) “submit to inspections,” and (3) “pledge to begin eliminating nuclear programs after a ‘preparatory period’ of three months.” In return for all this, the North “would receive shipments of heavy fuel oil (HFO) to meet its energy needs, gain a ‘provisional security guarantee’ from the United States and see the lifting of some sanctions.”⁷ The product of close collaboration with its allies, especially, Seoul, the proposal envisions that HFO and other energy assistance would come, not from the United States, but from South Korea and Japan. Russia has also indicated a willingness to join in the aid program. As already noted, China is already the single most important source of food and fuel aid to the North.

One seemingly minor but symbolically important tactical change the United States displayed at the third round was to refrain from using the term CVID (a complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of the North's nuclear program). Recognizing that "the repetition of that demand and the suggestion that North Korea had to give up its nuclear program before it could expect benefits had inflamed sensibilities at earlier rounds," the United States agreed with its allies, South Korea and Japan, that avoiding CVID would be prudent. That did not mean, however, that Washington had scaled down its goal of complete denuclearization. For it made crystal clear that the North must freeze and then dismantle all of its nuclear programs, including the one utilizing highly enriched uranium (HEU).⁸

At the same round, North Korea reiterated what it calls a "reward for freeze" proposal, first unveiled at the second round in February. As Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan, the North's chief delegate, explained, his country would be ready to freeze all plutonium-related facilities, including the five-megawatt graphite-moderated reactor and reprocessing facility in Yongbyon. The North would also "refrain from producing more nuclear weapons" and from testing or transferring them to other countries. Such freeze, Kim stressed, would be the first step toward the "ultimate dismantling of [North Korea's] nuclear weapons program." The duration of the freeze, however, would hinge on the kinds and duration of "reward" the United States would offer.⁹

Pyongyang's assessment of the U.S. proposal, however, was largely negative. While calling the U.S. decision not to use the expression, CVID, "fortunate," a DPRK Foreign Ministry spokesman nonetheless assailed the U.S. proposal for a "preparatory period" of three months for full disclosure of nuclear programs, submission to inspections, and start of the work to eliminate nuclear programs. Pointing out that the persistence of mutual distrust and misunderstanding had prevented a breakthrough, he called on the United States to drop "its unreasonable assertion about an enriched uranium program and the like" and to renounce its "hostile policy toward the DPRK."¹⁰

This suggests both an opportunity and a major hurdle. The United States can safely show flexibility with regard to the duration of a preparatory period, which can be extended to six months or even longer. What cannot be changed, however, is the demand for a dismantling of the HEU-based nuclear weapons development program. Can the North be persuaded or pressured to reverse its position on the HEU issue? Reversal of positions and policies, actually, is nothing new to Pyongyang. Noteworthy examples include (1) the United Nations membership issue, (2) bilateral versus multilateral negotiations, and (3) the abduction issue involving Japanese nationals.

In the first two examples, Pyongyang's policy reversals--acceptance of separate UN membership with Seoul in 1991 and acquiescence first to three-party talks in April 2003 and then to six-party talks four months later--owed primarily to Beijing's assiduous diplomacy. In neither case, however, was the North required to acknowledge that it had not been truthful. It is in the third example that one sees the North taking an extraordinary step--admitting that it had indeed kidnapped Japanese nationals, of whom five were alive in the North. What is more, in an unprecedented gesture the North's supreme leader, Kim Jong Il, apologized to Koizumi for the abductions. All this occurred during the first summit between the two leaders in Pyongyang in September 2002.

Should the North decide to reverse its position on the HEU issue, however, there would not be any need for an apology. Actually, such a development would signal a second reversal by Pyongyang on the same issue. For, according to Washington, the North initially admitted the existence of an HEU-based nuclear weapons program in October 2002, when U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly visited Pyongyang.

Inducing Pyongyang to make a second reversal would require a concerted effort, including, especially, Chinese intervention. Until recently China had expressed "considerable doubts" about U.S. claims of the existence of an HEU-based nuclear program in the North. In preparation for the November 20 meeting in Santiago between Bush and Hu Jintao, however, Washington took the unusual step of "passing to Beijing 'classified packets' of data intended to convince the Chinese that the North has two weapons programs under way." According to an unnamed senior U.S. government official, the "Chinese made their own inquiries from Pakistan, and we believe they got confirmation there...They don't seem to be questioning the validity of that intelligence anymore, at least in private."¹¹

If the preceding account is true, then China will have an incentive to use its leverage over the North to prevent the HEU issue from torpedoing the six-party talks. For its part, the U.S. can provide some inducements to the North as well. During his visit to Pyongyang in October 2002, Kelly was reported to have offered a "bold approach" to his negotiating partner, DPRK first deputy foreign minister Kang Sok Ju. The North must dismantle its nuclear weapons program and "enter into talks with Washington on other pressing issues, including a reduction of military forces on both sides of the demilitarized zone that separates the two Koreas...missiles, biological and chemical weapons as well as human rights issues." In return for all this, the U.S. was prepared to do the following:

- It would review the 1994 Agreed Framework with the aim of replacing the light-water reactors (LWRs) with “thermal power plants capable of generating the same volume of electricity” the LWRs would have produced--namely 2,000 megawatts.
- “In addition, the United States would [provide] high-voltage power transmission lines and hydropower plant generation technology, [assist] in building roads and bridges and [push] for North Korea to join the ranks of major international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.”
- The United States would also begin “negotiations to convert [the 1953 Korean armistice agreement] into a peace treaty and remove North Korea from its list of nations known to sponsor terrorism.”
- The United States would offer “humanitarian assistance in the form of food aid and the construction of hospitals and schools.”¹²

Whether such a “bold approach” would be offered again is open to question. Among other things, the answer will hinge on the inclination of the national security team in Bush’s second term. How will, for example, the absence of Colin Powell affect foreign policy? Condoleezza Rice, who will replace Powell as secretary of state, incidentally, is credited with coining the term “bold approach” in 2002. Although a hard-liner, Rice is believed to be more pragmatic than ideological. There is nonetheless a good chance that the so-called “neocons” headed by Vice President Dick Cheney will help shape U.S. foreign policy to a greater extent than was the case in the first Bush term. This is why no one can rule out the scenarios that postulate an aggravation, rather than an amelioration of the nuclear standoff on the Korean Peninsula.

SOUTH KOREA’S ROLE

What should South Korea do to help forestall the worst-case scenarios from materializing? At a speech in Los Angeles on November 13, Roh Moo Hyun made a controversial remark about the North’s nuclear weapons program: North Korea’s assertion that “nuclear weapons and missiles are deterrents with which to protect itself from external threats,” he suggested, may have some validity. “For no one can state with absolute certainty that North Korea is developing nuclear weapons in order to attack someone or aid terrorists,” he added. He also expressed confidence that given the right incentives--namely, security guarantees and encouraging signs that reform and opening would succeed--the North would give up nuclear weapons.¹³

According to Lee Jong-seok, deputy head of the ROK National Security Council, Roh’s remarks were “the result of a desire to restart the stalled six-party talks.”¹⁴ When they triggered a storm of controversy, however, the Roh government must have become

apprehensive. To its great relief, Bush did not raise the issue when he met with Roh in Santiago a week later. Roh and his entourage, in fact, rated the Santiago summit a huge success, going so far as to conclude that Bush had given a green light to Seoul's desire to play a "leading role" in the six-party talks.

As a major source of humanitarian and other aid to the North as well as its second most important trading partner, Seoul does theoretically have some leverage over Pyongyang. Thus far, however, South Korea's actual impact on North Korean behavior with respect to the nuclear issue has been marginal. One reason for this may be the Roh government's failure to link its economic transactions with the North to the nuclear issue, which is actually inconsistent with a commitment Roh made in May 2003 during his first summit meeting with Bush.

A challenge for the Roh government, then, is to step up efforts to induce the North to make a "strategic choice" to exchange nuclear weapons programs for security assurances and tangible economic benefits. This would require not only rejuvenating inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation but also fortifying the ROK-U.S. alliance, the pillar of Seoul's foreign policy and the ultimate guarantee of its security. Accelerating consultations with the other participants in the six-party talks is also crucial, and the Roh government's recent diplomatic efforts at the APEC summit in Santiago, Chile and the ASEAN plus 3 summit in Vientiane, Laos are steps in the right direction.

¹ David E. Sanger, "Bush Says Iran Speeds Output of A-Bomb Fuel," *New York Times*, November 21, 2004.

² "Munje nun Migugui chongch'aek pyongyong kwa p'yonghwajok kongjon uiji e itta" [The Problem Hinges on the U.S. Willingness to Change Policy and Co-exist Peacefully], *Nodong sinmun* [Labor News] (Pyongyang), November 23, 2004.

³ Sanger, "Bush Says..." *New York Times*, November 21, 2004, emphasis added.

⁴ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Background Briefing by Senior Administration Officials on the President's Bilateral meetings* (Hyatt Regency Santiago, Santiago, Chile, November 20, 2004), <http://usinfo.state.gov/utills/printpage.html>

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Joseph Kahn, "North Korea Is Studying Softer Stance from the U.S.," *New York Times*, June 24, 2004.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ "DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman on Six-Party Talks," *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)*, June 28, 2004, Pyongyang, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2004/200406/news06/29.htm>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Sanger, "Bush Says..." *New York Times*, November 21, 2004.

¹² Nobuyoshi Sakajiri, "U.S. Offer to N. Korea Still Alive," *Asahi Shimbun*, November 27, 2004, <http://www.asahi.com/english/world/TKY200411270157.html>

¹³ Chongwadae, *Kukje munje hyobuihoe chuch'e och'an yonsol* [Luncheon Speech to the World Affairs Council] (Seoul: Office of the President, Republic of Korea, November 13, 2004), <http://www.president.go.kr/cwd/kr/archive/popup-archive-print.php?meta-id=diplomacy-2004...>

¹⁴ "Washington Wants Explanation for Roh's Comments," *JoongAng Daily*, November 18, 2004.