

Chapter Twelve

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Korean Peninsula: Old Problems and New Challenges

Executive Summary

- The Korean Peninsula situation quite often reminds one of a pendulum swinging from a recurrent crisis to negotiation. Observers tend to call the process a vicious circle. The longest period of hiatus (April 2009 to present time) in the Six-Party Talks was marked by a full-scale crisis, including an outburst of hostility between North and South Korea.
- Russia, like the other members of the Six-Party Talks, is truly interested in the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Russia is also very much alarmed by the continuing unmonitored development of North Korea's nuclear programs in recent years. At the same time, Moscow prefers a gentle and flexible diplomacy toward Pyongyang, which proves to be more efficient than the pressure from the U.S. and South Korea.
- The death of Kim Jong Il and the accession to national leadership of his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, has confirmed the DPRK's internal stability and foreign policy continuity. The DPRK's domestic political environment remains quite stable, its political system is more consolidated, and the friendly relations between China and North Korea continue to deepen across the board. At the same time, the succession has opened new opportunities for restoring bridges between the adversarial parties on the peninsula based on the logic that negotiation is a better option than confrontation.

The Conflict Scenario

The Korean Peninsula security situation in general and North Korea's nuclear programs in particular have been marked by worsening inter-Korean relations for most of the past three years. They reached a culmination in 2010, when the two Koreas were on the verge of a hot war. At the same time, the mechanisms for resolving, freezing, and, eventually, eliminating tensions on the peninsula were almost completely ineffective in 2011. This applies both to bilateral format and also to the main international tool designed to meet those goals – the Six-Party Talks in Beijing. Incidentally, the military conflict, which resulted in the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island on November 23, 2010, confirmed again the common truth that, when diplomats refrain from a dialog and are silent, guns begin to speak.

There were many reasons this happened. One was that, during the period, especially throughout 2010, the US-ROK alliance exerted unprecedented pressure on both North Korea (in order to facilitate the regime collapse) and China (in order to show Beijing that the price of its support for North Korea is becoming excessively burdensome), in a hope to drive the Chinese away from supporting Pyongyang. The nonstop military drills along the North Korean borders and sometimes in the vicinity of China were examples of the strategy.

Washington's and Seoul's goals were, however, unfulfilled. The DPRK's domestic political environment remains quite stable, its political system is more consolidated, and the friendly relations between China and North Korea continue to deepen across the board. North Korea's nuclear programs have continued unchecked. As a result, despite the UN Security Council Resolutions (No. 1784, of 2006, and No. 1874, of 2009) North Korea's nuclear programs, based now on new uranium technology, have been quite impressive.

Prominent American nuclear physicist Siegfried Hecker, who has visited North Korea on numerous occasions and who was

shown, for the first time, the new facility with 2,000 operational centrifuges in October 2010, found both the scale and the technological level of the new nuclear facility “stunning.”¹

Pyongyang’s behavior did not change. Instead, it became more decisive and dangerous. One of the purposes of the November 23, 2010 artillery shelling of the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong was to send a signal that North Korea is ready to fight for survival at any price. At the same time, as Victor D. Cha correctly notes, “even a hawk must acknowledge that a long-term policy of sanctions and military exercises in the end may lead to war before they lead to a collapse of the regime.”²

Moreover, Pyongyang has launched its own counter game. Following a traditional operational logic (“meet force with more force”), it tried to demonstrate to the United States two clear alternatives—either bilateral talks or further development of its nuclear programs. By the same token, South Korea is under pressure to choose between dialogue and conflict.³

Immediately after the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, ROK President Lee Myung-bak was repeating statements made by U.S. President George W. Bush between 2002 and 2003 almost word for word: “I will never again sit down at the negotiating table with the North Koreans, because that would mean rewarding their bad behavior.”

It is a known fact that some influential circles in the United States, particularly of the conservative camp, harbor the view that, because North Korea is unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons, negotiations with Pyongyang are useless in principle.

Can the deadlock be resolved given such perspectives and positions? It seems very unlikely.

¹ Siegfried S. Hecker, “A Return Trip to North Korea’s Yongbyon Nuclear Complex,” NAPSNet Special Report (November 22, 2010).

² Dr. Victor D. Cha, “Testimony Before the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs” (March 10, 2011), <http://www.csis.org/program/korea-chair>.

³ Jong Seok Lee, “The Next Kim: Prospects for Peace in Korea,” *Global Asia* (Seoul: Winter 2010), 4, 5: 81.

The Negotiation Scenario

It is true that many negotiations have been held between the DPRK and its opponents, with the nuclear problem being one of the issues discussed, and many of them ended in fiasco.

However, there have also been successful negotiations. In contrast to the Northern Limitation Line (NLL) in the Yellow Sea, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) was mutually negotiated. It was agreed upon and is still recognized by the North, whereas there have been constant problems with the NLL.

On the nuclear issue, which is of greater concern, the most successful period of strict international monitoring of North Korea's nuclear programs were the seven years when the Agreed Framework signed by the United States and the DPRK in October 1994 was in effect; and the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), in spite of all the difficulties over the operation of the consortium and its final fiasco, gave the world its first successful and rich experience of collaboration between the "irrational, maniacal, and untrustworthy North Koreans" and a broad range of Western partners.

It is true that the North Korean representatives frequently walked out of the negotiations without fulfilling their obligations. However, an impartial analyst would admit that their Western partners just as often broke, failed to meet, and tried to repackage or reinterpret their own obligations. This is an objective and documented fact.

Back to North Korea's nuclear programs: the historical evidence confirms again that they were successfully subjected to international monitoring, frozen, and even sometimes reversed only when the North Koreans were in negotiations with interested partners and under obligations that they had voluntarily accepted during negotiations with those they recognized as their equals. That was the case until very recently, during periods when the terms of the Six-Party negotiations in Beijing were successfully implemented.

Of course, those were temporary and partial successes. But, in the first place, they actually happened; and, in the second place, they were better than nothing, better than the unrestricted development of North Korea's nuclear capability, which is what we have now.

Pyongyang considers itself now legally free of any obligations. It immediately rejected the UN Security Council's respective resolutions, which the DPRK considers as unjust. The international sanctions are not stopping it from moving forward in the nuclear area.

It is quite apparent that the plans to force Pyongyang to give up its nuclear programs by squeezing it with sanctions, pressure, and increased isolation are ill-founded and simply do not work. It is when North Korea's leaders are feeling increased military and other threats from outside that they make the maximum efforts to speed up work on strengthening their "nuclear shield." They are prepared to sacrifice much for its sake, including limiting economic freedom and reforms (in the North Korean understanding of those concepts, of course). That conclusion is also supported by the entire period we have observed throughout the development of the present situation on the Korean Peninsula. The events of the past two years confirm such a conclusion. Leading Western specialists in the nuclear area raise concerns with regard to the rapid progress achieved by Pyongyang during this period. They acknowledge that "North Korea makes significant progress in building a new experimental light water reactor" and that "the rapid construction of the plant may be an important indication of Pyongyang's intention to move forward as quickly as possible with its uranium enrichment effort – to produce fuel for the reactor and potentially fissile material for nuclear weapons – as well as of the level of the North's commitment to its WMD programs in general."⁴ Moreover the earlier mentioned "nuclear guru" S. Hecker argues, "If North Korea conducts a third nuclear test that will be very risky. If another

⁴ North Korea Makes Significant Progress in Building New Experimental Light Water Reactor (ELWR) (November 14, 2011), available at: <http://38north.org/2011/11/elwr111411>.

of the North's nuclear tests is successful, I believe North Korea will succeed in the necessary miniaturization within a few years."⁵

The only real, workable method to first halting, then gradually limiting, and, in the long run, eliminating North Korea's nuclear programs and capability is for the main players to begin substantive negotiations with it as soon as possible. While closely monitoring Pyongyang's fulfillment of its obligations, all parties involved should not fail to meet their own commitments.

The Six-Party Talk mechanism in Beijing is a perfectly workable tool that has provided solid, useful experience. Therefore, it would be very desirable to restart the talks as soon as possible. At the same time, we should not rule out the emergence of other international mechanisms to deal with similar problems in the future.

It is also worth reminding of the formula well known in the nonproliferation community: you cannot seek nonproliferation and regime change at the same time. Whenever attempts at regime change are started, successful nonproliferation efforts come to an immediate halt.

Russia, like the other members of the Six-Party Talks, is truly interested in the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Russia is also very much alarmed by the continuing unmonitored development of North Korea's nuclear programs in recent years.

In 2011, Moscow scored an important success in communicating to Pyongyang the international community's concerns. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Alexander Borodavkin, visited Pyongyang on March 11–14, 2011 and directly called on North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks without preconditions, declare a moratorium on the new nuclear and long-range missile tests, include uranium enrichment issue into the Six-Party Talks agenda, and to provide the IAEA inspectors access to the nuclear facilities, including the ones with uranium-enrichment capability.

⁵ Siegfried Hecker, *Third Nuke Test May Allow North Korea to Miniaturize Bombs: Expert* (December 14, 2011), available at: <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/third-nuke-test-may-allow-north-korea-miniaturize-bombs/>

The most important result is that the Russian diplomats seemed to succeed in convincing the DPRK leadership to accept the abovementioned requirements. In particular, the DPRK Foreign Ministry Representative noted: “The Korean side expressed its own position that the DPRK is ready to participate at the Six-Party Talks without preliminary conditions and does not object to uranium-enrichment-issue discussion in the Six-Party Talks framework, and, in the case of the Six-Party Talks resumption, other problems raised by the Russian side may be resolved on the action-for-action principle base in the process of the implementation of the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement regarding the whole Korean Peninsula denuclearization.”⁶

So Pyongyang via Moscow sent to the international community a clear signal that it is ready to take a much more flexible and constructive approach in order to be engaged in a substantive dialogue.

As early as March 2011, North Korea signaled its readiness to return to the Six-Party Talks without preliminary conditions. It was confirmed by the late Kim Jong Il personally during the Russia-DPRK summit in Ulan-Ude in August 2011. The North Korean leader reiterated interest in the earliest resumption of the Six-Party Talks as well as readiness to introduce a moratorium “on production of nuclear materials and their tests” during the multilateral talks. Thus, Moscow’s gentle and consistent diplomacy, which persuades Pyongyang to be flexible, proves to be more efficient than the pressure of the U.S. and South Korea.

As a result, the situation paradoxically changed and some Six-Party Talks’ participants swapped their roles. Pyongyang started to regard their resumption favorably, whereas Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo demonstrated an unhurried and restrained attitude. Following the “strategic patience” and “wait and see” approach, they put forward preliminary conditions toward North Korea, with some of them obviously unacceptable to the latter. They kept repeating

⁶ The DPRK Foreign Ministry Representative Comment (The DPRK Embassy in Moscow PressRelease, March 15, 2011).

that, before the talks could be restarted, they needed to check the seriousness of the DPRK's intentions. However, many observers interpreted this as a typical tactic of delay. Perhaps one of the main reasons for such a line of behavior was an expectation in Western capitals that the long-expected Kim Jong Il's demise would lead to disorder and collapse in North Korea.

Leadership Change in DPRK

The death of Kim Jong Il marks a watershed moment between distinct epochs in the history of North Korea, prompting intense debate over the multiple scenarios possible for the anticipated transition.

In this regard it is noteworthy that the mass expressions of grief in North Korea may seem shocking to foreigners but certainly cannot be written off as insincere. It is true that collectivism is pervasive in this heavily organized state and affects the way emotions are displayed, but it would also be unfair to deny that – in line with the Confucian tradition – the perception of the country leader as the father of the nation is widespread among the population and that people are indeed mourning Kim Jong Il. The tendency within the original North Korean political culture to ascribe a special role to the national leader has a legitimizing impact on Kim Jong Un's claim to power. It is true that he is very young, has a minimal record of involvement in state affairs, and, in fact, has held the successor status for just over a year. Still, he has learned a lot over that period of time, acting as his father's apprentice and making no blunders in the process. More importantly, the nation actually sees him as the successor.

Obviously, both Kim Jong Un and the entire North Korea are facing a tough challenge at the moment. From now on, a lot will depend on Kim Jong Un's aptitude, willpower, and other requisite leadership qualities. His elder peers – the stalwarts from his father's inner entourage – will certainly do their best to help him during the initial phase, but that type of interaction should not be interpreted

as evidence that Kim Jong Un will have a purely nominal status. For North Korea, combining the leader's singular status with collectivism in top-level decision making is a long-standing tradition, though the balance between the two elements fluctuates. Even Kim Il Sung was not invariably the number one figure in North Korea's party and administration (in the initial stages) and, even at the peaks of their careers, neither he nor Kim Jong Il sidelined such collective governance bodies as the Central Committee of the Labor Party, the National Defense Commission, and others.

Predictions that North Korea will shortly plunge into chaos and that a tide of infighting will sweep over its leadership have failed because they were completely groundless. North Korea demonstrates robust political stability, with nothing like an organized opposition or public protests of considerable proportions in sight.

It is natural that divisions over individual issues exist in the North Korean administration, as they do in any other country, but, in the North, they do not seem to escalate into irreconcilable discord. The constant external threat facing the country further cements its administration. Pyongyang is mindful of its opponents' strategies focused on inducing regime change and monitors the emergency military planning of the U.S.-ROK alliance, which certainly had its own plans ready to set in motion in the event of the sudden death of the North Korean leader. The developments in Libya and the fate of Muammar Gaddafi made North Koreans realize what kind of punishment the West administers for defiance. By the way, Pyongyang immediately drew a peculiar conclusion, which has been expressed in an official statement. It essentially points out that Gadhafi's fatal mistake was he was too naïve; he believed the West's promises and swapped his national nuclear program for international security guarantees. They got rid of him as soon as he lost his "nuclear teeth." North Korea does not intend to make that mistake, and it will continue improving its defense capabilities, including its nuclear deterrent, which constitutes a security guarantee in and of itself.

The North Korean elite and the politically active part of society have no illusions as to their chances for survival in the case of a regime change. More than any ideological directives, such concerns encourage full cohesion, a desire to stay loyal to the country's leader, and a determination to ruthlessly suppress any tendencies toward internal discord.

At least in the midterm, we can expect to see complete continuity in North Korea's foreign and domestic policies, with its young leader likely to emphasize allegiance to his father's legacy. Pyongyang's approach to key foreign policy issues, including its involvement in the Six-Party Talks on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, will, therefore, remain unchanged.

It should be noted that the recent developments in North Korea open up new opportunities for other interested parties, and time will show how they will take advantage of them. Now is a good time to turn the page on past conflicts and to start cultivating contacts with the young North Korean leader. No doubt, the biggest role in rebuilding bridges to Pyongyang could be taken by the United States. Washington's usual foreign policy planning strategy is to compile alternative scenarios and to constantly be prepared to make political U-turns. The transformation from a condition bordering on war to fruitful cooperation in the wake of Kim Il Sung's death and the signing of the 1994 Agreed Framework provide a vivid example of such flexibility. The Bush administration made a similar maneuver in 2007.

Conclusion

Overall, the situation in North Korea remains stable, with Moscow and Beijing firmly espousing peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. Washington and Seoul are faced with the dilemma of either boosting pressure on Pyongyang with the aim of irreversibly breaking its resistance (a strategy loaded with extreme risks) or giving their policies vis-à-vis North Korea a serious facelift.

Quite unexpected scenarios may materialize in the game played out between Washington and Pyongyang. The U.S. Secretary of

State Hillary Clinton's visit to Burma, the country that used to draw Washington's condemnations in unsurpassed quantities as a "rogue state," was a bold initiative, and a similar breakthrough in dealing with North Korea may be in the offing (the precedent being Madeleine Albright's visit to Pyongyang in 2000). In any case, today's situation offers unique opportunities to end the stalemate in the US-DPRK and inter-Korean relations.

The third (and the first under Kim Jong Un's leadership) round of US-North Korea high-level bilateral talks, held in Beijing February 23–24, 2012, happened to be more successful than the previous two. For five days, the parties kept silence. But, on February 29, Washington and Pyongyang made statements demonstrating a real breakthrough in bilateral relations. In exchange for US food assistance (240,000 tons), continuation of discussions concerning further food supplies and the normalization of bilateral relations, North Korea decided to suspend nuclear tests, long-range missile launches, and enrichment of uranium at its Yongbyon nuclear facility and allow back international nuclear inspectors.⁷

It is quite symbolic that, at the very beginning of 2012, both the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, and the then (until November 2011) United States Special Representative for North Korea Policy, Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, almost simultaneously predicted the resumption of Six-Party Talks in 2012. The February 2012 success in the US-DPRK relations would back considerably such an optimistic forecast. However, the March 17, 2012, announcement by Pyongyang concerning its decision to launch a satellite into space to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung reduced the optimism strongly. We need again to watch closely in what direction the Korean Peninsula "pendulum" will move next.

⁷ North Korea-US deal revives hopes of nuclear disarmament talks (March 1, 2012), available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/01/us-korea-north-usa-talks-idUSTRE81S13R20120301>; DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman on the Result of DPRK-US Talks (February 29, 2012), available at: <http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm>.