



NEW DAWN OR FALSE HOPE FOR THE KOREAN PENINSULA?

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After conditions of crisis reigning on the Korean Peninsula in the first half of the year, the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, among other recent developments, heralds renewed hope for better relations on the Korean Peninsula. However, in spite of progress on “softer” issues, the crux to negotiations continues to be denuclearization. Whilst recognizing this will be a lengthy and protracted process, steps need to be taken in this regard if the reestablishment of lines of communication between the two Koreas is to be more than just a false hope.

Relations on the Korean Peninsula would appear to be on an upward swing with the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, discussions of family reunions, and the possible reviving of Mount Kumgang, a popular tourist destination for South Koreans. With inter-Korean relations having faltered for more than four years, the reopening of lines of communication between Seoul and Pyongyang is a positive step. This has inspired optimism over future relations, and hope that the path now lies open for both sides to move forward more constructively.

And yet, although welcome, steps taken in recent weeks are relatively easy, “soft” issues for the DPRK to compromise on. Indeed, Pyongyang, which would greatly benefit from additional economic resources from the South Korea, eyes inter-Korean economic cooperation as a means of procuring a stable source of resources and investments from the South. In Seoul, too, these measures are also relatively uncontroversial for President Park Geun-hye to sell to her party, this despite hardliners in her government opposed to greater rapprochement with the North. Nevertheless, both governments view the political impact of renewed relations as the most important factor.

In spite of recent developments, differing expectations between the two sides will form the crux of upcoming problems. The viewpoint from Seoul, and much of the international community, is that Pyongyang has to agree to denuclearization talks, and that this should constitute the essence of continued dialogue. Indeed, the sentiment is that future investments should be made contingent on Pyongyang making concrete progress to denuclearize. Recent indicators from Beijing point to the fact that Pyongyang could be will-

ing to retreat from its current position and accept dialogue on the issue, even potentially taking positive actions toward denuclearization. Caution, however, is called for in making realistic assessments of the situation.

The Nuclear Impasse

Having managed to largely evade ultimatums to halt its nuclear testing, Pyongyang partly labors under the false impression that there is a tacit agreement, or at least a possibility of such, for international acceptance of it being a nuclear state, one which is now inscribed in its constitution. Indeed, North Korea would appear to have very few possibilities to retreat from its current position: first and foremost, nuclear weapons (to the extent they are operational) are perceived as a security guarantee against any potential invasion from the U.S. What is more, it would be difficult for Kim Jong-un to initiate any reduction of the country’s nuclear capacity, as it is a popular strategy domestically, which, as perceived in Pyongyang, has garnered it “international prestige”; conservative elements among the North Korean elite would also likely be against any agreement stipulating immediate denuclearization. Another aspect is that acquiring nuclear capacity as a supposed guarantee of its survival, or so it is argued, now enables greater focus to be placed on economic development rather than the hitherto exclusively military-first policy.

This position contrasts sharply with that of South Korea and the U.S. Domestically for both countries, it would be very difficult to continue open dialogue with North Korea and make investments to kick start its faltering economy, hu-



manitarian aid excepted, if real progress on the denuclearization issue is not accomplished. President Park, for instance, is in a position where she cannot be perceived to be too weak, faced as she is with opposition from hardliners within her own party. Further, the events of February this year when North Korea conducted its third nuclear test are still fresh in the memory with there being precious little trust as a result.

Currently, therefore, there is a catch-22 situation, whereby neither economic development nor security can be guaranteed by the North's continued nuclear development. In such a situation, furthermore, it is unlikely that South Korea, and the international community at large, could continue with any constructive measures vis-à-vis North Korea; and simultaneously, North Korea will be unable to take any concrete steps in the short term.

What To Do?

What, then, can be done to overcome this impasse? The logical step would be to broaden and define the denuclearization agenda as an agenda for national as well as regional security. It needs to be made clear to Pyongyang that even if nuclear weapons, however unlikely, increased its security, its economic development would be imperiled, as well as have destabilizing regional and international consequences. Therefore, to convince North Korea, a stable and verifiable security environment needs to be provided, one which would persuade it to forsake nuclear weapons and accelerate domestic reforms.

The Six Party Talks have not proven successful recently in terms of multilateral cooperation in the region and it seems unlikely to expect otherwise in the short- to medium-term future. New talks, in whatever form, should be focused on modified security mechanisms to deal with North Korea's nuclear issue, focusing much more broadly on security of which denuclearization would be a central part. More specifically, future negotiation should include a wider range of regional security matters in areas of common interest for all countries in Northeast Asia, this since the North Korean nuclear program is not the only source of security challenges in the region. A similar idea has been articulated by South Korean President Park Geun-hye as part of a plan for a Northeast Asian peace initiative—the so-called Seoul Process. According to the latter's agenda, trust among Northeast Asian neighbors can be established by initiating negotiations dealing with areas of less sensitive and common interest, such as environmental protection, natural disaster management, but also nu-

clear safety. North Korea should be included into a Northeast Asian cooperation framework to encourage it to engage more constructively.

On the other hand, the international community may have to be prepared to realize that immediate denuclearization is not possible; rather it is the end goal of what is bound to be a lengthy and protracted process. The focus should therefore be on limiting the level of nuclearization rather than a complete reversal overnight, with steps toward denuclearization clearly defined.

In sum, a slow process toward denuclearization and a redefinition of the problem is not a strategy that will be viewed positively in Seoul or Pyongyang (or indeed the other capitals), and yet, potentially, it may be the only one that is acceptable. The single most important step is to at least initiate discussions on security—that is, denuclearization—even if it must be recognized that this is a long-term process. If this is not done, South Korea, and the rest of the international community, will continue to refrain from direct investments and relations will not be normalized, rendering recent events little more than a false hope. While not belittling these positive developments, they should not obfuscate the need for grasping the nettle of making concrete steps on the issue of denuclearization.

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