



# TOWARDS A “RESET” IN U.S.-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS?

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*More than two years on since the last official talks between the two countries, recent indicators from Pyongyang and Washington could prove auspicious for a “reset” in U.S.-North Korea relations. But while Pyongyang is signalling a willingness to engage in strategic dialogue with the United States, this policy brief argues that options for diplomacy and dialogue remain remote as long as the impasse on denuclearization remains unresolved.*

North Korea is making efforts towards alleviating its diplomatic isolation, seeking economic assistance from the international community, as well as wants to see a resumption of the stalled Six-Party Talks. With Kim Jong Un’s leadership seemingly consolidated after early signs of potential instability in the succession process, it may be in Pyongyang’s calculus that it now needs to diversify relations and obtain a better external security environment. Recent months have seen Pyongyang take part in dialogue with Tokyo while a high-level delegation visited European countries in early September. Yet a priority for Pyongyang remains pursuing talks with Washington. From North Korea’s perspective, it is only the U.S. which can provide a security guarantee to the regime and alleviate the impact of sanctions. These are what it wants to ultimately achieve from dialogue, including recognition from the U.S. of the DPRK’s nuclear status. To this end, there have been several signals from North Korea that it is attempting to entice the United States into engaging with it. The Obama administration meanwhile is interested in securing the release of American detainees, is in the process of reshuffling its policy staff on North Korea, as well as has conducted secret visits to Pyongyang. However, its fundamental stance that concrete measures need to be taken by North Korea on denuclearization before reentering substantive dialogue remains unchanged—a precondition Pyongyang has steadfastly rejected. This policy brief explores the significance and intentions behind recent moves and developments before concluding that any “reset” in bilateral relations is highly improbable in the near future.

## North Korea’s Cards

North Korea is wielding an array of strategic options at its

disposal to try and persuade the U.S. to engage in dialogue. These are summarized below.

*Nuclear Strategy:* According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), North Korea has recently re-operated the Yongbyeon reactor to produce more plutonium-based nuclear bombs and might have made further progress in developing highly-enriched uranium (HEU). Meanwhile, North Korea still holds the option of conducting a fourth nuclear test to demonstrate its nuclear capacity. Pyongyang believes that by stepping up its nuclear capacity, it can help inject more urgency into President Obama’s so-called strategy of “strategic patience,” and so strong-arm it back to the negotiation table and de facto force Washington to recognize North Korea as a nuclear state.

*Detained Americans:* North Korea has detained three U.S. citizens so far. The missionary Kenneth Bae has been held since December 2012 with a sentence of 15 years, which he is serving in a labor camp. North Korea recently also sentenced Matthew Todd Miller to six years hard labor for his “hostile acts” at Pyongyang airport. A third, Jeffrey Fowle, who left a bible at a hotel in Pyongyang, will be put on trial soon. It would seem that North Korea is attempting to use them as a bargaining chip so as to obtain a high-ranking visit from Washington; Pyongyang has in the past released detained U.S. citizens to delegations led by former U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter.

*UN Meeting:* North Korea’s foreign minister Ri Su Yong has recently visited New York to attend a meeting at the United Nations General Assembly. This is the first visit by a North Korean foreign minister to New York in 15 years and which appears to be indicative of Pyongyang’s intention of pursuing a strategy of dialogue with the U.S. This seems to have backfired. On September 23 it was reported by the Chosun Ilbo that Ri Su Yong was barred entry to



a meeting on North Korean human rights issues. At this meeting State Secretary Kerry went on to denounce the existence of prison camps in North Korea.

## U.S. Reshuffling Policy?

The Obama administration has not responded to North Korea's "signals." While reshuffling its North Korea policy staff and according to some sources having conducted a covert visit to Pyongyang, these should not necessarily be equated with any change in policy course, as is examined below.

*Staff Reshuffle:* Sydney Seiler, who is a senior adviser to the National Security Council (NSC), is likely to be appointed deputy special representative for the Six Party Talks. He is expected to assume the role as a contact person in communicating with Pyongyang through the "New York channel," which refers to unofficial meetings between North Korea's UN delegation and U.S. officials. The government will also change the special representative for the Six Party Talks from Glyn Davies to Sung Kim, the current U.S. ambassador to South Korea, and he will concurrently serve as deputy assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Some believe that the upcoming line up of new staffs indicates the Obama administration's intention to pursue a new policy toward North Korea during the last term of his presidency. It is too early to tell whether this will be the case. Given that the special representatives will be under the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs—a move which could be interpreted as subordinating their role under the larger framework of Obama's East Asia policy—the reshuffle's significance should not be overstated. Indeed, it could serve to restrict the scope of action on its side.

*Secret Visits:* According to the Japanese News agency, *Kyodo News*, a group of U.S. officials made a secret trip to Pyongyang in August 2014. A South Korean newspaper, *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, claimed that this was not the first secret trip from Washington and that secret contacts between the two countries were also made before the U.S. Presidential election in November 2012. It can only be speculated what the content of talks was. In any case, the first trip yielded no tangible progress in U.S.-DPRK relations whereas, most plausibly, the timing of the second trip was also conducted so as to warn North Korea not to commit any provocations before the U.S. mid-term elections.

*Releasing Detainees:* The U.S. is interested in finding a dip-

lomatic solution to the detention of U.S. citizens in North Korea. However, any deal is undermined by different aims. Washington has made it clear that it doesn't plan to link the humanitarian issue of releasing U.S. citizens with any steps towards a substantive deal. It is therefore reluctant to accede to Pyongyang's wishes of dispatching a high-level envoy. This contrasts with the larger expectation in Pyongyang that the detainees' release through such an envoy could help pave the way to the unconditional resumption of the Six-Party Talks.

## Conclusion

In sum, any steps towards a "reset" in U.S.-North Korea relations are highly unlikely in the near future. Despite signals indicating Pyongyang's willingness to engage in strategic dialogue with the U.S., these are likely to fall largely on deaf ears in Washington, which sees nothing new in Pyongyang's actions. In the light of North Korea's violation of previous agreements, Washington continues to see limited usefulness in pursuing dialogue with Pyongyang without significant steps first taken on the part of the latter to halt its nuclear program. There is nothing to indicate—rather, the opposite—that North Korea is willing to take such steps. Furthermore, confronted with other domestic and foreign policy priorities, the Obama administration is not likely to change its policy course on North Korea.

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