

CREATIVE DIPLOMACY AND NORTH KOREA

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This policy brief looks at how North Korea has figured as an issue on the sidelines of the recent APEC Summit in Beijing in the context of developments such as Pyongyang's release of two American prisoners. The author argues that there are some promising signs of diplomatic efforts by the relevant parties—and in particular on the part of China—and suggests that increased policy coordination and perhaps even some progress on North Korean issues may be seen in the months ahead.

The North Korean nuclear issue would appear to be intractable, with no side prepared to compromise on its fundamental position. The U.S. steadfastly maintains that North Korea must demonstrate serious commitment to denuclearization before negotiations can be re-opened, while North Korea shows no sign of willingness to reverse progress on its nuclear program. Nevertheless, events such as the recent release by Pyongyang of two American prisoners and discussions on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit indicate that diplomatic maneuvers to deal with the North Korea issue have been playing out, and it seems that China's role in these efforts has been important. Although the importance of any of this should not be overstated, these could well be signs pointing to increased policy coordination between the various parties involved over the months ahead.

On the Sidelines of APEC

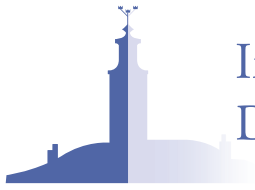
As the APEC summit convened this week in Beijing, North Korea—which is, of course, not represented in the regional economic organization—was on many people's minds. There have been small but hopeful signs of a more constructive attitude from the North Koreans towards the international community over the past few months, most recently the release of American prisoners Kenneth Bae and Matthew Todd Miller. Some have expressed hope that these signs could be harbingers of progress on the nuclear issue. In mid-October, John Kerry indicated that after conversations with Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi, he was hopeful that “the dynamics can develop in the next weeks, months perhaps, where we could get back to [the six-party] talks.” President Obama downplayed these hopes at a press conference during the APEC meeting, saying that the “fun-

damental conflict” between the U.S. and North Korea was unchanged and that “small gestures” such as the prisoner release have not been accompanied by any “serious engagement” by Pyongyang on the nuclear question.

Several of the summit meetings on the sidelines of APEC involved discussion of North Korea. The meeting between Xi Jinping and Park Geun-hye resulted in an undertaking by China and South Korea to work together on “creative and diverse measures” to encourage North Korea to make “a strategic choice” on denuclearization. Similarly, a short meeting between Barack Obama and Park Geun-hye resulted in a commitment by the U.S. and South Korea to “closely cooperate in various levels on the situation on North Korea and countermeasures.” Denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula was also on the agenda for the meeting between Obama and Xi, although this issue has been overshadowed by the other major U.S.-China announcements from APEC on climate change, military-to-military relations, and visas.

Diplomatic Maneuvers

It is certainly the case that “creative and diverse measures” will be necessary if any progress is to be made on the North Korean nuclear issue. It is difficult to see how the six-party talks—which were suspended in 2009 after the withdrawal of the North Korean side—can now be resumed. On the one hand, the U.S. insists that North Korea must take concrete steps towards denuclearization before it will re-enter talks, and on the other, North Korea has written its status as a “nuclear-armed state” into its constitution and continues to actively develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. The U.S. position is that denuclearization talks must take place in a multilateral setting that involves



South Korea at a minimum, while the North Koreans press for direct talks with the U.S. on the basis of “one nuclear state to another.”

John Kerry’s comments last month indicate that in spite of the seemingly intractable nature of the North Korean nuclear problem, there are behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts going on at present to re-open talks. A recurring theme in recent developments involving North Korea is that China has been using its back channels to good effect, e.g. the State Department acknowledged that China had a role in the negotiations leading to the recent prisoner release. John Kerry has credited China with taking a tougher stance on North Korea in recent times. In an interview on the *Charlie Rose Show*, he commented, “the Chinese are being helpful. They’ve taken measures way beyond where they were a year ago. When I went to visit last spring, we engaged in a discussion where they agreed to step up their efforts with the North, and they have. They’ve actually reduced the amount of jet fuel going into the country. They’ve put limitations on trade going into the country.”

China’s Leverage

How much leverage China has over the North Koreans at this point is another question. There is some evidence to suggest that China dissuaded the North Koreans from proceeding with a fourth nuclear test earlier this year. In April, satellite imagery of the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site suggested preparations for a test were underway, but it seems the preparations were halted following Chinese expressions of opposition. One cannot be sure of the cause-and-effect relationship here—and, indeed, some analysts suggest that preparations have been completed for a nuclear test that can be carried out any time following a political decision—but if it is the case that China was able to exert influence over the North Koreans in this instance, it represents a welcome improvement on the situation in 2013, when North Korea conducted its third nuclear test in spite of vocal opposition from China and all other regional actors.

The relationship between China and North Korea has certainly changed over the past few years, from the “blood alliance” of old to one that is increasingly described as a “normal state-to-state relationship.” China’s priority is obviously to avoid a regime collapse, with the destabilizing effect that would bring. China provides a large amount of economic aid to North Korea for this reason, but shows no signs of having any great affection for Kim Jong Un, who is still waiting on an invitation to Beijing for a state visit, while

the relationship between China and South Korea seems to be flourishing. This shift in the dynamics of the relationship may result in a situation in which Pyongyang no longer feels that it can take Beijing’s support for granted and feels more pressure than before to listen to the Chinese point of view.

Concluding Remarks

The public statements that have come out of APEC regarding North Korea may be only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the conversations that have gone on between the assembled regional leaders on what Barack Obama has called “the number-one security priority” for “all countries in the region.” It may well be the case that the economic summit has been the occasion for policy co-ordination between China and the other relevant countries and that the weeks and months ahead may see some movement on North Korean issues as a result. What we might call “creative diplomacy,” drawing on all the instruments in the diplomatic toolbox, from persuasion to coercion, as well as close co-ordination between the parties involved, will be necessary if any progress is to be made.

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