

BREAKING THE DEADLOCK: SECURITY BUILDING ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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Economic aid has failed to induce North Korea to denuclearize. Instead, reducing tensions and addressing mutual security concerns is the only way to break the stalemate in denuclearization negotiations, argues Sangsoo Lee.

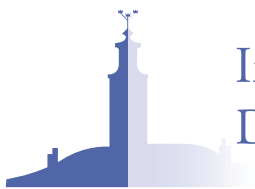
With the Six Party Talks—the main multilateral mechanism to negotiate North Korea’s denuclearization—moribund since December 2008, the North Korean nuclear issue appears increasingly intractable. On the one hand, North Korea has proceeded apace with its nuclear program and enshrined its nuclear status in its constitution. On the other, the United States and South Korea continue to see little utility in returning to formal negotiations unless North Korea first shows credible commitment to dismantling its nuclear program. Meanwhile, military exercises on both sides of the DMZ serve to exacerbate military tensions which further underpin the North’s nuclear resolve. In such a context of distrust and insecurity, there is currently little prospect of resuming formal negotiations. While previous agreements focused on tying economic incentives to denuclearization measures, it is clear that such a strategy has yielded little progress. Accordingly, rather than inducing North Korea with economic aid, a more fruitful approach would be to address existing security concerns on the Korean Peninsula. This firstly entails defining a mutually agreed entry point to restart negotiations. Once restarted, a phased process of implementing reciprocal security building measures should be conducted in parallel to denuclearization negotiations.

It’s Security, Stupid

The international community has wielded a stick-and-carrot approach to persuade Pyongyang to denuclearize. In spite of international sanctions and the promise of compensation including economic aid, there has been no positive change in North Korea’s position. On the contrary, Pyongyang has further advanced the country’s nu-

clear program: the South Korean government estimates that North Korea has been operating around 2,000 centrifuges since 2010, producing 40 kg of Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) annually. In February, a report by the Institute for Science and International Security stated that by 2020 Pyongyang could have more than 20 actual nuclear weapons in its possession. Furthermore, the regime’s Byongjin policy stresses the necessity of pursuing economic development and nuclearization concurrently. It is thus increasingly clear that nuclear weapons are not principally regarded as bargaining chips for North Korea to extract economic concessions, but rather as instruments of regime security and national prestige.

Pyongyang justifies nuclear weapons by pointing to what it calls the U.S. “hostile policy.” In particular, the annual joint U.S.-ROK military exercises are seen by North Korea as a major threat—with the use of strategic bombers, nuclear submarines, and aircraft carriers in activities conducted in areas close to the NLL and DMZ. It therefore demands that joint exercises cease and that the perceived U.S. nuclear threat be lifted. Conversely, the U.S. and South Korea point to the defensive nature of the joint exercises by highlighting North Korea’s military provocations. According to the South Korean defense ministry, North Korea fired about 90 ballistic missiles and rockets last year; these were fired toward the West and East coasts close to the border with South Korea. Indeed, there has been marked increase in the frequency and range of North Korea’s missile capability. Regardless of whether each side’s actions are offensive or defensive, the unstable security environment on the Korean Peninsula is not conducive to resolving security tensions or the nuclear dilemma, and it casts a shadow over other avenues of cooperation.



Defining Entry Points

North Korea's official KCNA news agency announced that a proposal was conveyed to Washington on January 9. The offer was that North Korea was willing to suspend nuclear tests if the U.S. agreed to call off annual military drills held jointly with South Korea. This was seen by the DPRK as a clear potential "action for action" measure which could provide impetus for a return to negotiations. However, the U.S. rejected the proposal as it views the exercises not only as routine and normal defensive behavior against military provocations from the North, but also because the proposal was deemed as insufficient as it did not address North Korea's own military exercises. Furthermore, the joint military exercises have never been part of denuclearization negotiations and thus demands for their cessation are seen to go beyond previous agreements—namely the February 29, 2012, and September 19, 2005 agreements to which Washington demands that Pyongyang recommit and adhere.

But while North Korea's proposal was rejected, in a situation of stalemate it has become increasingly necessary for the U.S. and North Korea to reach compromise on an entry step so as to at least facilitate the restart of meaningful discussions regarding the nuclear issue and stability on the Korean Peninsula. This necessitates reviewing previous agreements and understanding their limitations. While much of the blame is pinned on Pyongyang renegeing on the agreements, it is clear that Pyongyang places greater emphasis on gaining security assurances in return for denuclearization measures than it does economic incentives. While the importance of addressing North Korea's security concerns should be better understood by Washington, Pyongyang should also realize that expecting an immediate cessation of U.S.-ROK military exercises is unfeasible; not least given that such a demand would be interpreted as being designed to reduce South Korea's own deterrence capabilities.

The focus should therefore be on limiting the level of joint military exercises rather than on an immediate and complete reversal, with steps to be taken towards a cessation of military exercises being clearly defined. Accordingly, downscaling or modifying the location of joint military exercises (for example away from the NLL or DMZ) in exchange for a moratorium on North Korea's nuclear testing could represent an option so as to kick-start the long-stalled negotiations on the nuclear issue. While such a compromise may constitute a convenient entry point, it is also clear that security building also needs to be integral to a longer-term

process of resolving military tensions in parallel to denuclearization negotiations.

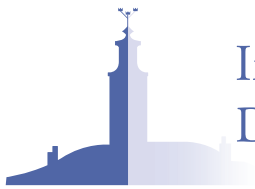
CSBMs and Security Building

As such, resumed negotiations will need to be underpinned by Confidence and Security-Building Measures (CSBMs). Reducing tensions will build confidence and allow negotiations in other areas, including those on denuclearization, to proceed more smoothly. Steps undertaken could include the establishment of a direct military hotline between the South and North Korean militaries; a consultation process for unusual military events; prior notification of exercises; notification of increased troop presence and major weapons deployment; and mutual commitments to renounce the use of nuclear weapons. While notification and information exchange are important as initial steps, it would also be necessary to move gradually towards the actual reduction of threats. For example, the U.S. could propose to cease landing operations and the deployment of strategic and sensitive weapons in return for North Korea agreeing to a moratorium on missile test firings.

CSBMs could thus form part of a phased roadmap on the Korean Peninsula ranging from smaller steps to larger steps. In so doing, each party would need to define the value of reciprocal steps and their sequencing. In this regard, Northeast Asia could learn from the Helsinki Process and the OSCE as an example of CSBMs. These served to prevent the escalation of smaller conflicts into greater and more dangerous confrontations and which reduced the level of tensions between the Soviet and Western blocs.

Conclusion

Given its security dilemma, Pyongyang will not abandon its nuclear program or missile launches unless it is provided with sufficient security assurances. Contrariwise, North Korea's behavior and actions are deemed unacceptable by the U.S. and South Korea to sit down at the negotiation table and provide the scope of reassurances it desires. Such a situation necessitates that both sides compromise by defining an entry point to negotiations. Once official negotiations are resumed, the issue of CSBMs and regional security building needs to be pursued as a parallel approach to support denuclearization negotiations; one cannot proceed without the other. South Korea has proposed "exploratory talks" where the six parties can convene without prior



preconditions. This might prove a good avenue to discuss the security concerns and explore the security bargains that need to be reached both before and during any resumption of Six Party Talks.

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