

The Quest for an Effective North Korea Strategy

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Introduction

Two decades of negotiation between the Republic of Korea, Japan, and the United States with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has failed to yield a durable resolution to the problems that plague the long divided Korean Peninsula. Nor have the Chinese-hosted Six Party Talks (China, Japan, North and South Korea, Russia and the United States), which commenced in 2003, resolved any key issues. Awaiting resolution is the peaceful end of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program, specifically its development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, South-North Korea reconciliation, the future status of US military forces in Northeast Asia, and North Korea's abduction of fifteen Japanese citizens.

Negotiations have formulated several bilateral and multilateral agreements such as the 1992 South-North Korea Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression and Exchange, the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework, the 2002 Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration and the September 2005 Six Parties' Joint Statement. Implementation of these agreements, however, has been uneven. Consequently they have yet to achieve their original objectives.

Conventional wisdom argues that Pyongyang is largely responsible for this failure. It is accused of having repeatedly broken its commitments under the 1991 South-North Korea Joint Declaration on the De-nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the US-DPRK Agreed Framework. In both agreements North Korea proclaimed that it would cease all its nuclear activity, allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections at its nuclear facilities and not possess, produce or develop nuclear weapons. Eventually, however, North Korea declared these accords inoperative, withdrew from the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and resumed all its nuclear activities. In 2006 it tested its first nuclear bomb. Then in April 2009 it withdrew from the Six Party Talks and in May 2009 conducted its second test of a nuclear bomb. Obviously Pyongyang's actions and broken promises have contributed significantly to the inability of negotiations to achieve durable resolutions.

At the same time, however, vacillation in the policies of South Korea, the United States and Japan toward North Korea have also blunted the effectiveness of negotiations. Further compounding this situation has been disagreements between these governments as to how best to deal with North Korea. The polarization of policy makers and politicians within each nation over how to deal with North Korea has additionally complicated efforts to forge any durable resolutions.

In short, formulation of an effective strategy toward North Korea requires more than finding fault with Pyongyang. Its failures are quite obvious and well known largely because the United States, South Korean and Japanese governments have been quick to point them out and the international press equally thorough in reporting them. Less apparent are the shortcomings of the United States, South Korea and Japan in their various approaches to the DPRK. This paper concentrates on identifying these

deficiencies in the hope of contributing to the development of a more effective, multilateral effort to achieve a peaceful end to North Korea's WMD programs.

A Double Edged Dilemma

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) on November 2, 2009 presented the United States and the international community with yet another dilemma, a favorite negotiating tactic. Eventually, however, the dilemma became Pyongyang's because the other Six Party Talks participants pursued patient, persistent and closely coordinated diplomacy that compelled North Korea to decide whether to return to the Six Party Talks or do what? Pyongyang posed its dilemma in an official policy statement by the Foreign Ministry spokesman who declared,¹

As the DPRK was magnanimous enough to clarify the stand that it is possible to hold multilateral talks including the six-party talks depending on the talks with the U.S., now is the U.S. turn. If the U.S. is not ready to sit at a negotiating table with the DPRK, it will go its own way.

The statement was designed, like several similar announcements before it, to compel the United States and other Six Party participants to decide between negotiating with North Korea on its terms, i.e. bilateral talks with the United States, or co-exist with a nuclear armed North Korea.

Earlier in 2009 North Korea appeared to revise its basic strategy for dealing with the international community by shifting from one that accented diplomacy and negotiation to "bolstering up its (military) muscle ..." The DPRK Foreign Ministry (FM) spokesman previewed this shift in a March 24 statement that concluded, "If it is impossible to put an end to the hostile relations through dialogue, then there is no other option but to bolster up the muscle to deter the hostile actions."²

At the same time, the Korean People's Army appears to have increased its influence on policy formulation. Suggesting this was the issuance during the first half of 2009 of several policy statements by various military authorities. For example, KPA vice Marshal Kim Yong Chun, vice chairman of the powerful National Defense Commission (NDC) which is chaired by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Il, issued a report on April 8.³ In it Marshal Kim described the KPA as "the main force of our revolution and the hardcore force for defending the country ..." He went on to urge that "We should continue to push ahead with the work for increasing the national defence capability ...," and "give priority to the development of the defence industry, ..."

Subsequently North Korea responded with outrage to the UN Security Council (UNSC) Presidential Statement of April 13, 2009. The statement condemned North Korea's April 5 launching of a ballistic missile which Pyongyang claimed was made to place a satellite in earth orbit. Japan rejected this claim and, as temporary president of the UNSC, urged that additional UN sanctions be placed on North Korea. When Russia and China refused

to support sanctions, Japan settled for a statement. The DPRK's April 14, 2009, Foreign Ministry statement declared that:⁴

... there is no need any more to have the six-party talks ... The six-party talks have lost the meaning of their existence never to recover now that the parties ... totally denied this spirit in the name of the UN Security Council ... The DPRK will never participate in such six-party talks nor will it be bound any longer to any agreement of the talks ...

The KPA General Staff's spokesman followed with his own statement on April 18. The statement first labeled South Korea's decision for "total participation" in the US promoted weapons of mass destruction counter proliferation effort Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) to be a "... a declaration of war against the DPRK." The statement further declared "The army of the DPRK has never pinned any hope on the six-party talks from their outset ..."⁵ Later the KPA's Panmunjom Mission (formerly the KPA Mission to the Korean War Military Armistice Commission) also announced that, "The KPA will not be bound to the Armistice Agreement any longer ..."⁶ By May 29, Pyongyang declared that it would "not recognize any resolution and decision of the UNSC ..." and reiterated its determination to strengthen its nuclear might.⁷

Japan's effort, supported by the United States, United Kingdom and France in the UNSC to coerce North Korea to halt its WMD programs had back fired. Instead of compliance with international pressure, North Korea once again reacted with assertive anger and pulled out of yet another multilateral forum.

North Korea: Internal Politics and Priorities

To understand North Korea's withdrawal from the Six Party Talks in April and its December 2009 decision to return to the talks, we need to look beyond Pyongyang's obvious anger. Instead, we need to better understand Kim Jong Il's relatively weak position as North Korea's leader, a consequence of his feeble legitimacy as its ruler and poor health following an apparent stroke in 2008. At the same time we can trace the effective diplomacy of China and the United States in 2009 as they worked together to nudge North Korea back to the Six Party Talks.

Since inheriting his father's role as the nation's ruler, Kim has catered to the needs and desires of his generals. While he cherishes the title of "Supreme Commander," his position does not necessarily make him supreme in policy matters. Unlike his father, Kim Jong Il's sole claim to legitimacy is the fact that he is his father's son. Father Kim Il Sung is credited in North Korea with having preserved "Korea's" independence and sovereignty as the head of the army that first defeated the Japanese "imperialists" prior to 1945 and then the American "imperialists" during the Korean War. This legacy endowed father Kim with an aura of infallibility and nationalism that no one in North Korea dared challenge.

Kim Jong Il does not share such a legacy. He came to power without any significant accomplishments. To garner the loyalty of North Korea's most powerful political entity, the Korean People's Army (KPA), Kim Jong Il apparently felt compelled to declare in 1998 his "military first policy" (*son'gun chongchi*) followed by setting the national goal as "building a strong and great nation" (*kangsong taeguk*). Kim then formally assumed the title of "Supreme Commander," designated the National Defense Commission the nation's foremost policy making body and was "elected" its chairman.⁸ Ever since, the KPA has received priority access to the nation's scarce resources and appears to have steadily increased its influence on national priorities and policies.

By January 2009 the General Staff of the Korean People's Army (KPA) had begun issuing its own unprecedented policy statements.⁹ One consequence has been an intensification of North Korea's belligerence and provocative conduct to unprecedented heights, particularly between January and July 2009. Its leadership remains determined to build a "nuclear deterrent capability" aimed at preserving the nation's "sovereignty" despite nearly sixty years of economic sanctions. North Korea's politically potent generals have repeatedly used UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions and bilateral sanctions imposed by the United States and Japan to rationalize Pyongyang's pursuit of a nuclear arsenal.¹⁰

The KPA's influence has become increasingly evident in what North Korea expects as a resolution to the nuclear issue. Since 1994 it has reiterated its numerous demands but not until recent months has it done so in a clear and precise manner. For example, when Pyongyang approved the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement, it did so with little clarification. Subsequent negotiations similarly failed to clarify North Korea's interpretation of key clauses in the September 2005. For example, what did North Korea understand to be "verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula?"¹¹

Pyongyang's January 13, 2009 Foreign Ministry spokesman's remarks and DPRK Ambassador to the United Kingdom Ja Song Nam's October 22 public discussion in London provide precise clarification of North Korea's perspective. It is interesting to note that Ja, a career diplomat, served as liaison between the Foreign Ministry and Korean People's Army unit assigned to the Military Armistice Commission. He thus has the trust of the KPA and is well versed in its perspective.

Ja, after repeating Pyongyang's belief that the North Korea must have a nuclear deterrent capability to defend against a possible US attack, explains Pyongyang's position in refreshingly clear and precise terms.¹² Ja explains that the United States provides a "nuclear umbrella" over Japan and South Korea. At the same time, he continues, neither China nor Russia provides a nuclear umbrella over North Korea. Thus, because of the alleged "US hostile policy" toward North Korea, his nation feels compelled to develop its own "nuclear deterrent capability."

He alleges that the Six Party Talks revealed that the United States' true intention is to disarm North Korea of its nuclear deterrence, not to de-nuclearize the Korean Peninsula.

Successful “de-nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” in Pyongyang’s view, requires that the United States:

- End its “hostile policy” toward North Korea by “dropping” all sanctions,
- Replace Korean War Armistice with a peace treaty,
- Cease threatening the DPRK with nuclear weapons and remove its nuclear umbrella over Japan and South Korea,
- Discontinue military “war exercises” on the Korean Peninsula,
- Make Northeast Asia a nuclear free zone,
- Allow inspections for nuclear weapons in South Korea (the January 13 Foreign Ministry statement elaborated that such “free field access” should be conducted “simultaneously.”), and
- The eventual withdrawal of US military forces from South Korea.

North Korea’s concerns and goals as listed above are consistent with North Korea’s *Juche* political ideology. Preservation of the nation’s right of self determination and defense of national sovereignty are core values of *Juche*.¹³ Consequently, Pyongyang views the international community’s condemnation of its weapons tests as an infringement on North Korea’s “sovereignty.” Pyongyang’s concerns become even clearer when viewed in the context of China’s foreign policy priorities.

China’s Preferences and Priorities

China, more than any other nation, is aware of and sensitive to Pyongyang’s internal politics. For the first time in history, all the nations of Northeast Asia share the goals of sustaining peace, prosperity and stability in the region. At the same time, their shared concern is how to accomplish these goals. For China, a key foreign policy priority is to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula and good relations with both Koreas. Toward this end, Beijing considers North Korea’s possible collapse as contrary to its national interests. Simply put, China relies on North Korea as a buffer between China’s sphere of influence on the Korean Peninsula and that of the United States.

China also since 2001 has been working to increase North Korea’s economic dependency on it with at least two primary goals in mind: first, increase its diplomatic leverage in Pyongyang, and secondly promote the economic development of its three northeastern provinces (Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang) by enhancing North Korea’s potential as a trade partner.¹⁴

After Pyongyang’s angry reaction to the April 14 UNSC Presidential Statement and withdrawal from the Six Party Talks, China, with Russia’s support, moved to head off a possible confrontation between the United States and Japan, on the one hand, and North Korea on the other. At the same time Beijing hoped to salvage the Six Party Talks which it had initiated in 2003. But before it took any action, China’s foreign policy makers became embroiled in a candid debate over how to deal with North Korea.¹⁵ North Korea’s May 26 second nuclear test intensified the debate.

But when the UNSC moved in early June to impose additional economic sanctions on North Korea, China's "traditionalists," particularly those in the People's Liberation Army and others who favor a benevolent policy toward North Korea, decisively won the policy debate. China and Russia on June 12 voted in favor of UN Resolution 1874 but they successfully limited the sanctions to halting North Korea's export of weapons and acquisition of materials and technology related to the development of weapons of mass destruction. Resolution 1874, per their insistence, rules out actions that would impede "humanitarian and developmental" financial activities related to North Korea. China's representative on the UNSC Ambassador Zhang Yesui commented after the resolution's passage that,¹⁶

The DPRK had violated Security Council resolutions, impaired the effectiveness of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and affected international peace and stability." Thus China supported the resolution. ... It should be stressed, however, that the sovereignty, territorial integrity and legitimate security concerns and development interests of the DPRK should be respects. ... Under no circumstances should there be use of force or threat of use of force. China had always stood for a peaceful solution to the situation and had made tremendous efforts in that regard, including by initiating the six-party talks.

China's actions apparently preserved Beijing's leverage in Pyongyang. China then engaged the governments in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo in intensive diplomatic discussions aimed at perpetuating the Six Party Talks by inducing Pyongyang to rejoin them. The apex of this effort came during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's October 4-6 visit to North Korea and summit talks with Kim Jong Il. Wen, according to Chinese and DPRK officials speaking off the record in Beijing in early November, assured Kim Jong Il that China in 2010 would provide North Korea ample food and energy aid in amounts sufficient to render economic sanctions ineffective in the event that the United States or other nations attempted to coerce Pyongyang into accepting their demands. The aid reportedly equals the largest amount of assistance that China will provide to North Korea since the post-Korean War reconstruction period of the 1950s. The People's Liberation Army is believed to have been the primary advocate of this effort.

These reports of a massive aid package are consistent with China's over all approach to North Korea since at least 2005, if not earlier. When Hu Jintao and Kim Jong-il held a summit in October 2005, Hu reportedly told Kim, "it is the firm strategic policy of the Chinese Communist Party and government to steadfastly develop close China-DPRK relations."¹⁷ The provision of a massive amount of aid in 2010 will promote two of China's key priorities toward North Korea: sustain North Korea as a buffer state with the United States, which is important to the People's Liberation Army, and help restart the Six Party Talks, a priority of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Upon returning home, Wen declared that North Korea would return to the talks.¹⁸

Trilateral Collaboration on Six Party Talks

Wen's declaration, however, did not fully satisfy the Obama Administration. Kim Jong Il wanted something from the United States that the United States refused to give – bilateral US-DPRK talks. Jeffrey Bader, U.S. National Security Council adviser on Asian Affairs, explained in a November 6 speech at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. He said (Jeffrey Bader, "Obama goes to Asia: Understanding the President's Trip," November 6, 2009).¹⁹

We (the US government) are ready to talk to North Korea in the context of the Six-party Talks with the explicit goal of de-nuclearization and with recognition that its previous commitments to de-nuclearize and return to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, notably those in 2005, remain valid.

In other words, Washington, D.C. insisted that Pyongyang meet two requirements before bilateral US-DPRK talks could commence: North Korea must declare its intention to return to the Six Party Talks, and it must reaffirm its commitment to the September 2005 Six Party Joint Statement in which North Korea promised to ultimately cooperate with the "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" and return to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

President Obama's swing through East Asia in mid-November, 2009 confirmed that his administration shared with China, Russia and South Korea a firm commitment to accent negotiations and inducements to convince North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks and to cooperate with the Korean Peninsula's de-nuclearization. In their November 17 joint statement, Obama and Wen²⁰

reaffirmed the importance of continuing the Six-Party Talks and implementing the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement, including denuclearization of the Korea Peninsula, normalization of relations and establishment of a permanent peace regime in Northeast Asia. ... The Chinese side welcomed the start of high-level contacts between the United States and the DPRK. ...

Here Obama highlighted some of the key inducements that the United States would be willing to extend to North Korea in exchange for progress on the Korean Peninsula's denuclearization. China at the same time noted with pleasure Washington's agreement to dispatch Special Envoy on North Korea Issues Ambassador Bosworth to Pyongyang on December 8, 2009 to engage in discussions aimed at paving the way for the Six Party Talks resumption early in 2010.

At his next stop in Seoul, South Korea, President Lee Myung-bak reaffirmed the US-South Korea goal of the "complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea through the six-party talks."²¹ Lee's reference to the "denuclearization of North Korea" indicates less than his complete acceptance of the wording in the September 19, 2005 Six Party's Joint Statement which reads, "the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." For

North Korea, reference to the “Korean Peninsula” is critical because it insists that the entire peninsula, both south and north Korea, must be denuclearized this must be verified with simultaneous inspections in both Koreas. Premier Wen and President Obama used the same language as the 2005 accord in their November 17 joint statement, but not President Lee. In short, it would appear that on the one hand, South Korea agrees with the resumption of the Six Party Talks and reliance on inducements to win North Korea’s cooperation, Seoul is hesitant to accept inspections in its half of the Korean Peninsula.

By early December, multilateral diplomacy appears to have tempered Pyongyang’s outrage and restored its willingness to return to the Six Party Talks. For reasons not yet entirely clear, North Korea also accepted the Obama Administration’s two prerequisites for bilateral talks. Pyongyang thus resolved the dilemma it had presented the United States and the international community in its November 2 statement. President Barak Obama subsequently announced on November 17 during his visit to Beijing that State Department Special Envoy for North Korean Affairs Ambassador Bosworth would convene bilateral talks with North Korean counterparts in Pyongyang on December 8. (U.S. Department of State Daily Press Briefing, November 19, 2009.²² Once again North Korea and the United States reaffirmed their preference to rely on diplomatic negotiations rather than confrontation and coercion to resolve their differences.

But North Korea’s return to the Six Party Talks is merely one more beginning to the continuing saga of the international effort to end North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction programs. If future negotiations are to achieve any durable success, then the first step toward success requires that the participants in the Six Party Talks share common priorities and tactics. As of December 2009, the United States, China and Russia appear to favor an over all policy of engagement that accents inducements. South Korea seems at least partially committed to such an approach.

Japan, however, under Prime Minister Hatoyama has yet to commit itself. Hatoyama’s predecessors Prime Ministers Abe, Fukuda and Aso preferred “containment” toward North Korea. Continuation of Japan’s unilateral stance could diminish the ability of the other Six Party Talks participants to present North Korea a united front. The previous inability of the three allies the United States, Japan and South Korea to coordinate their approaches to North Korea greatly diminished the effectiveness of their efforts to gain Pyongyang’s compliance with their goals.

The Other Dilemma – Containment or Engagement?

Since 1988 South Korea, Japan and the United States efforts to deal with North Korea have vacillated between various degrees of containment and engagement. Each strategy was originally designed by the United States to achieve specific foreign policy goals. Containment’s original goal was to diplomatically and commercially isolate selected communist nations, weaken them and eventually compel their collapse or submission to the United States’ and its allies’ demands. The US Democratic Administration of President Truman originally applied a policy of containment to North Korea after it attacked South Korea in June 1950. Containment encompassed a variety of

coercive tactics that encompassed UNSC condemnation of North Korea as an aggressor, its exclusion from many international organizations, the imposition of Trading with the Enemy Act (TWEA) economic sanctions and the refusal to engage North Korea in any form of diplomatic or commercial contact. Many aspects of the U.S policy of containment toward North Korea were adopted by South Korea and survived the Cold War. North Korea points to this fact as the basis for its claim that the United States still maintains a “hostile policy” toward it.²³

The antithesis of containment is engagement, a policy initiated by Republican President Nixon’s US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1972. Kissinger’s original aim was to use diplomatic and economic inducements to draw China away from the Soviet Union. The initial phase of engagement required removing the architecture of containment, i.e. the establishment of diplomatic channels of communication, engagement in negotiations, the phasing out of economic sanctions, the encouragement of U.S. allies to do likewise toward China, and China’s admission to the United Nations and its replacement of Taiwan on the UNSC. By 1976, “Red China” and “communist China” had become the People’s Republic of China. Engagement gradually transformed China from a closed, impoverished, distrusted and isolated nation into an increasingly respected member of the international community with a dynamic export oriented market economy and relatively greater individual freedom.

China, however, continues to be ruled by a one party authoritarian government. Individual political freedom remains limited and under close police surveillance. Its record of respect for human rights leaves much to be desired. China has also retained its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Nevertheless, China peacefully co-exists with the international community. The intense fear and distrust that China once excited has now evaporated.

Deterrence

A fundamental aspect of both containment and engagement is the continuation of deterrence, the US Cold War military strategy for dealing with its adversaries. Deterrence requires that the United States maintain military superiority vis a vis its enemies. The aim is to deter an adversary from risking war with the United States and/or its allies because US military superiority would quickly overpower and destroy any “aggressor.” To sustain deterrence, the United States developed defense treaties with allies that formed a collective security network that ringed its adversaries, i.e. the “communist bloc” of nations. This network enabled the United States to “forward deploy” US land, naval and air forces in its allied nations. The system ensured that the United States and its allies would consider an attack on one ally to be an attack on all, triggering collective retaliation.

Collective security was further reinforced by a nuclear armed strategic triad of nuclear armed land, sea and air ballistic missiles. To further protect its allies, and also to discourage their acquisition of nuclear weapons, the United States extended a “nuclear umbrella” over its allies. If an adversary dared to launch a nuclear attack on either the

US or one of its allies, the United States could immediately retaliate from any where in the world with devastating nuclear force.

The entire system was intended to be defensive. The hope was that no adversary would be so foolish as to risk an attack for fear that US military superiority would promptly render it a waste land. Fortunately for the world, the United States and its allies never needed to deploy their nuclear triad. Neither collective security nor nuclear deterrence, however, could forge durable peace.

Northeast Asia's Continuing Cold War

The strategy of engagement eventually defused superpower rivalry and distrust. By the 1980s, the United States engagement of China and the Soviet Union opened both societies and initiated a process of change that has transformed and integrated them and most of their former allies into the international community. In short, engagement helped bring the Cold War to a gradual but peaceful end.

But the Cold War persists in Northeast Asia. Many aspects of the US Cold War policy of containment remain focused on North Korea. The United States and its allies Japan and South Korea still maintain a collective deterrence strategy aimed at North Korea. Through the US-Japan and US-South Korea defense treaties the United States augments each nation's armed forces with its own forward deployed land, sea and air forces station in both nations. Japan and South Korea also benefit from the US continuing nuclear umbrella over them.

Once the Cold War had ended, the US was prepared to phase out its military posture in South Korea and Japan. Actually former President George H.W. Bush ('41) initiated the withdrawal in 1991 when he directed that all US tactical nuclear weapons be withdrawn around the world and brought back to the United States. But discovery in the summer of 1992 that North Korea was clandestinely developing a nuclear weapons capability suspended the withdrawal of US conventional land, sea and air forces. The US military posture in Northeast Asia today remains similar to what it was in 1992 except that President George Bush ('43) transferred some US infantry units to Iraq and in 2006 agreed to relocate 8,000 US Marines from Japan's Okinawa prefecture to the U.S. territory of Guam. Nevertheless, the United States maintains a formidable military force in Northeast Asia that includes the land, sea and air forces of its allies Japan and South Korea. Backing them is the US nuclear strategic triad which is now based on US territory but capable of quickly launching a nuclear attack against North Korea.²⁴

The Cold War's legacy also defines North Korea's diplomatic and commercial relations with the United States, Japan and South Korea. As will be discussed in greater detail later, each of these three nations maintains varying elements of containment in its relations with North Korea. US-North Korea diplomatic and commercial relations have yet to be normalized. Japan essentially maintains a policy of containment toward North Korea that bars normal bilateral diplomatic or commercial relations. South Korea

continues to vacillation between varying degrees of containment and engagement of North Korea.

The reality that the Cold War persists in Northeast Asia cannot be ignored in our quest for an effective strategy toward North Korea. For North Korea, this reality is the essence of the problem. It claims that the United States' forward development of military units in South Korea and Japan, military alliances with them, joint annual military exercises and extension of a nuclear umbrella over both allies requires that North Korea develop its own "nuclear deterrent capability." North Korea's leadership further alleges that coercive tactics are evidence of the United States' so-called "hostile policy" toward the DPRK designed to "strangle it."²⁵

To underscore its concerns, Pyongyang often points to President George Bush's January 2002 State of the Union speech in which he declared that the president of the United States has the authority to use conventional and/or nuclear weapons to attack those nations he believed threatened the United States. Bush specifically identified Iraq, Iran and North Korea. Officially this was a "proactive counter-proliferation effort." It became more widely known as the "Bush doctrine" of preemption.²⁶ The Obama Administration has not done anything to suggest that the "Bush doctrine" no longer is an element of US global strategy.

The Never Ending Debate

Against this back drop of Cold War diplomatic and military strategies, a political debate continues about whether containment or engagement is appropriate for dealing with North Korea. At the same time, two decades after the Cold War ended, South Korea, Japan and the United States have yet to determine common priorities and goals in their policies toward North Korea. As for goals, each of the three societies is also essentially polarized over whether North Korea should be compelled to collapse or allowed to survive. Comprehension of this debate requires some familiarity of its jargon. Generally speaking, the contending camps divide themselves into so-called "hard liners" and "moderates."²⁷

"Hard line" advocates favor a containment type policy that accents coercive tactics such as economic sanctions, international chastisement and even the threat of military action to either compel North Korea's compliance with international demands and norms, or to undermine the Kim Jong Il regime. This is widely referred to as a "hard landing." Hard liners often insist that North Korea is unworthy of continuing existence as a separate nation. Their reasons vary from concerns about the North Korean regime's lack of respect for human rights to the hope of achieving Korea's unification under a democratic government.

Political party labels are not easily pinned on "hard liners." In the United States, there are both Republican and Democratic "hard liners." The same is true of "conservatives" and "progressives" in South Korea and the membership of Japan's Liberal Democratic and Japan Democratic Parties. The common meeting ground for "hard liners" is that

North Korea must be dealt with sternly because it is a perpetual threat to peace, can never be trusted, and is on the verge of collapse.

Hard liners generally agree that the Soviet Union's collapse and the 1990s famine in North Korea brought the DPRK to the brink of political and economic collapse. But international humanitarian assistance and the willingness of the United States to engage North Korea in negotiations prevented the collapse. Subsequent South Korean and Chinese economic cooperation with North Korea, in their view, revitalized the Kim regime and even allowed it to resume its development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. For so-called hardliners, the North Korean regime ultimately must be confronted with policies that will either force it to submit to the international community's demands or else will bring the regime to an end. Otherwise North Korea will persist as a threat to peace and stability not just in Northeast Asia but, through the proliferation of nuclear and ballistic missile technology, pose a threat to peace elsewhere in the world.

So-called "moderates" prefer engagement style tactics that would convince North Korea that it has more to gain by foregoing weapons of mass destruction development by subscribing to international demands and norms of conduct. They favor a gradual transform the DPRK, often referred to as a "soft landing." They argue that, despite more than fifty years of containment style policies directed at North Korea, coercive tactics have failed to achieve any sustainable progress toward peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Some claim these tactics have back fired and actually nurtured Pyongyang's distrust and rejection of the international community, particularly of the United States and Japan. Instead of weakening the DPRK, such tactics, moderates contend, fuse North Koreans into a resolute mass loyal to their leaders and who are determined to defend their nation's sovereignty.

"Moderates" champion a strategy of diplomatic and economic "engagement" designed to open the society to outside influence, to induce North Korea to cooperate with the international community, and to gradually transform it into a responsible member of global society. They recall the first Korean War and argue that efforts to contain and confront North Korea could result in a second, even more devastating war. Moderates point to China and Russia as successful models of such an approach. Actually, China and Russia prefer engagement and are actively pursuing it in their dealings with North Korea.

This debate has nurtured numerous studies of the impact that multiple layers of unilateral and multilateral economic sanctions have had on North Korea since 1950. Most of these studies have concluded that sanctions have not significantly altered the DPRK's conduct. The US unilateral financial sanctions imposed on the DPRK in September 2005 in connection with the Banco Delta Alpha case appear to have significantly disrupted Pyongyang's financial transactions. Politically, however, the sanctions may have back fired since they also severely disrupted progress toward ending North Korea's nuclear program. Studies of similar sanctions imposed on other nations since 1919 clearly indicate that the impact, if any, tends to be marginal.²⁸

The never ending debate between “hard” and “moderate” policy lines is a major cause for the vacillation in the policies of the United States, Japan and South Korea toward North Korea. The debate has distracted the three governments from their primary concern – dealing effectively with North Korea and its military threat. It has also prevented them from presenting a united front so as to enhance the effectiveness of their efforts and to prevent North Korea from manipulating one ally against the other.

Going in Circles

Consequently Washington, Tokyo and Seoul have each experienced alternating cycles of “hard” and “moderate” goals and tactics between 1989 and 2009. Here we briefly track this pattern of vacillation over the past two decades.

After nearly a half century of pursuing a policy of containment against North Korea, Seoul was the first capital to shift to engagement in 1989. Actually South Korean President Noh Dae-woo resumed in 1989 a process his predecessor Chun Doo-hwan had initiated by reaching the first agreements with North Korea that facilitated visits between families divided since the Korean War.²⁹ Noh greatly expanded on this with a series of negotiations that yielded the so-called “Basic Agreements” of 1992. These included the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression and Exchanges and Cooperation, the Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and several related protocols.³⁰

This success was abruptly blunted in the fall of 1992 when the International Atomic Energy Agency discovered evidence that North Korea, despite its pledges to South Korea and the international community, had clandestinely produced plutonium for possible use in the fabrication of a nuclear bomb. South-North Korean dialogue ruptured. After Kim Yong-sam was sworn in as Noh Dae-woo’s successor in February 1993, South Korea reverted to containment to deal with North Korea.

The United States, however, soon initiated its first diplomatic negotiations with North Korea to bring a peaceful end to North Korea’s nuclear weapons development efforts. At the behest of Seoul and Tokyo, Washington under the Clinton Administration began negotiations with Pyongyang that culminated in the signing of the US-DPRK Agreed Framework in October 1994. The accord “froze” North Korea’s nuclear activities and placed them under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring. In exchange, the United States promised North Korea that it would shift to a policy of engagement toward North Korea, oversee the construction of two nuclear reactors in North Korea, cease annual joint US-South Korea military exercises, and gradually normalize diplomatic and economic relations. South Korea remained only hesitantly supportive of the agreement but Japan enthusiastically embraced it.

But dueling between “hard liners” and “moderates” in all the concerned capitals, including Pyongyang, soon blunted the accord’s effective implementation. Pyongyang’s “hard liners” remained deeply suspicious of US intentions. North Korea’s military almost undermined the agreement, first in December 1994 when the KPA shot down an

unarmed US Army helicopter that had mistakenly flown into North Korea. Even worse was the so-called submarine incident of September 1996 when a North Korean submarine was found to have run aground off of South Korea's northeast coast after discharging approximately thirty heavily armed commandoes who were eventually found and killed in South Korea. Despite such incidents, the United States remained committed to a policy of engagement.

Washington's "hard liners" in the US Congress also did their best to disrupt the accord's implementation. Within weeks of the Agreed Framework's signing, Republicans won control of the House of Representatives and launched a cost cutting campaign that severely complicated the Clinton Administration's ability to carry out its promises in the accord. The Administration had promised to supply North Korea with heavy fuel oil (HFO) to burn in its electricity generating power plants until the promised nuclear reactors would begin operation. But the Republican controlled Congress rejected requests for funds to purchase the HFO. North Korea interpreted the Clinton Administration's inability to deliver HFO on a timely basis as a lack of political commitment to the Agreed Framework.

Construction of the first nuclear reactor in North Korea fell far behind schedule, largely because of disagreement between South and North Korea over the reactor's design. Initially the United States was willing to supply North Korea with a US designed reactor. But when Washington asked Seoul to fund a major portion of the construction cost, South Korea insisted that the reactor had to be of South Korean design. Finally on December 15, 1995, North Korea conceded to South Korea's demand and an agreement was signed regarding the supply of a South Korean reactor to North Korea.³¹

At the time North Korea's economy was severely depressed in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse and China's establishment of normal diplomatic and commercial relations with South Korea. Also a pervasive food shortage in North Korea had caused famine. Many "hard liners," including President Kim Yong-sam, believed these conditions would inevitably result in the collapse of the Kim Jong Il regime. President Kim believed cooperating with the US engagement policy toward North Korea would only delay the inevitable. Rather than confront the Clinton Administration over its policies and continuing implementation of the Agreed Framework, Kim sought to use his control of funds for the nuclear reactor construction project to further complicate and delay implementation of the Agreed Framework. Some in the U.S. Congress shared Kim's views and criticized the Clinton Administration's pursuit of engagement with North Korea. These "hard liners" contended that Clinton's policy was sustaining North Korea's dictatorial regime and its military might.³²

But in 1998, the South Korean people elected the "moderate" Kim Dae-jung as president and once again South Korea's approach to North Korea abruptly reverted from containment to engagement. Kim Dae-jung's efforts ushered in a new phase of South-North Korea cooperation and breathed new life into the Agreed Framework. Kim Dae-jung's administration enthusiastically embraced the Agreed Framework and eagerly funded the nuclear reactor project and the supply of HFO. His administration also

launched implementation of the 1992 “Basic Agreements.” South Korean tourists began to visit a national park in North Korea. A joint industrial project to be built in North Korea about 50 kilometers north of Seoul was agreed upon.

Washington, however, in 2001 reverted to containment. George W. Bush’s election as the 43rd US president brought into power an administration firmly committed to Cold War type containment of North Korea. When Bush first met his South Korean counterpart in the spring of 2001, they clashed over how to deal with North Korea. The two allies never resolved their differences and persisted in pursuing different policies toward North Korea.³³ Kim Dae-jung’s successor, Roh Moo-hyun, was also an advocate of engagement. After assuming office in February 2003, Roh continued his predecessor’s policies and intensified economic engagement of North Korea, much to the displeasure of President Bush, at least until 2005.³⁴

President Bush between 2001 and 2005 adamantly opposed any bilateral negotiations with North Korea.³⁵ In November 2002, after North Korea first admitted and then denied that it had clandestinely acquired the ability to produce highly enriched uranium, Bush declared North Korea to be in violation of the Agreed Framework. Construction of the nuclear reactor in North Korea and the supply of HFO it were discontinued.³⁶

As US-North Korea tensions intensified in the winter and spring of 2002-2003, South Korean President Roh continued his unilateral engagement policies with North Korea. Meanwhile China became increasingly concerned with the situation and hosted a meeting in Beijing between American and North Korean diplomats. This set the stage for the commencement of the Six Party Talks in August 2003. For the first time in history, all the world’s superpowers – the United States, Russia, China and Japan – came together with the two Koreas to attempt to negotiate a peaceful end to North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. The participants agreed to the need for a negotiated end to North Korea’s nuclear ambitions but were divided over how to accomplish this. China, Russia and South Korea preferred an engagement approach while the United States and Japan favored greater reliance on coercive tactics such as economic sanctions without inducements.

Actually during his first term in office, President Bush had preferred an almost classic containment approach to North Korea, but at the beginning of his second term he abruptly shifted toward greater reliance on engagement. This briefly brought Washington’s approach toward North Korea into alignment with that of China, Russia and South Korea. One possible consequence was the Six Party agreement that has become known as the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement. But no sooner had the Bush Administration committed itself to this accord than the very next day President Bush authorized the imposition of new economic sanctions on North Korea for alleged money laundering through the Macau based Banco Delta Alfa bank.³⁷ It would take another eighteen months of intense diplomacy to rectify the adverse consequences of Bush’s contradictory actions. Ultimately the September 19, 2005 agreement was preserved and all the parties re-affirmed their commitment to it in early 2007.

But by 2007, Japan had shifted from support for engagement to preference for containment. During the 1990s Japan had supported the Clinton Administration's approach to Pyongyang that accented negotiations with inducements and it had contributed significant diplomatic and financial support for the Agreed Framework's implementation. Prime Minister Koizumi even went to Pyongyang in September 2002 to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il with the goal of resolving the Japanese abduction issue.

In the 1970s and early 1980s North Korean agents had abducted at least fifteen Japanese citizens, some off Japan's coast line, and taken them to North Korea to serve as language teachers to persons being trained as North Korea spies. Although Koizumi achieved partial success, the revelation that most of the abducted Japanese had died in North Korea outraged the Japanese public. North Korea rejected Koizumi's efforts to learn the circumstances of these individuals' deaths and to obtain proof that they were dead. When Abe Shinzo succeeded Koizumi in 2006, he adopted a policy of containment toward North Korea that included unilateral economic sanctions. This put Japan at odds with South Korean President Roh's continuing preference for engagement and President Bush's increasing reliance on engagement. Abe's successors Fukuda and Aso both continued Abe's containment policies.³⁸ Whether Prime Minister Hatoyama, who defeated Aso in the August 2009 general election, prefers containment over engagement remains to be seen. As of December 2009 Hatoyama has continued Japan's unilateral economic sanctions on North Korea and bilateral diplomatic channels remain closed.

Soon after Japan had shifted toward containment South Korea did likewise. President Lee Myung-bak succeeded Roh Moo-hyun early in 2008. President Lee was elected in part because of his pro-containment stance toward North Korea. The majority of South Korean voters had concluded that Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun had given North Korea too much and received too little in return. President Lee responded with policies that are much more confrontational and coercive.³⁹ But no sooner had he done so than pro-containment President Bush left office and the new Obama Administration initiated a "carrot and stick" approach toward North Korea that accents negotiations and inducements over coercive tactics.

Prerequisites for An Effective Strategy

If the Six Party Talks are to achieve sustainable progress toward ending North Korea's nuclear weapons programs, then Washington, Tokyo and Seoul need to take several steps to ensure more rapid and sustained progress. They should assume that the DPRK will survive into the foreseeable future. To assume otherwise will only perpetuate the counterproductive debate between "hard liners" and "moderates" over how to deal with North Korea.

The three allies also need to settle on common tactics and goals. At the end of 2009, as discussed earlier, Washington, Tokyo and Seoul have yet to achieve this on the eve of the Six Party Talks' resumption early in 2010.⁴⁰ While President Obama has reverted, relative to the Bush Administration, to engagement, Seoul appears uncertain about the

goals to be achieved and Tokyo appears uncertain but essentially remains committed to containment. Meanwhile, Beijing and Moscow continue their preference for engagement.⁴¹

The allies need to recognize that further vacillation over their respective approaches benefits only Pyongyang. Pyongyang has previously exploited the gaps in policies between Washington and Seoul, and Washington and Tokyo by manipulating one ally against the other. This enabled it to maximize the inducements it gains while minimizing the concessions it had to make in the Six Party Talks. Pyongyang's "hard liners" between 2001 and 2008 also adroitly manipulated the situation to gain time to refine North Korea's weapons of mass destruction arsenal. The greater Pyongyang's confidence in its "nuclear deterrent" and ballistic missile capabilities, the greater will be the eventual price that North Korea will demand for dismantling its arsenal. This enabled Pyongyang to exploit the gaps

The allies also need to concede that economic sanctions have not been an effective tactic to gain North Korea's compliance with the international community's demands. If anything, Pyongyang has used economic sanctions to rationalize uncooperative and hostile conduct, and to prolong the negotiations. Sanctions have also proven ineffective in altering North Korea's policies and conduct in part because of the reluctance of China and Russia to enforce them.

Possibly the most difficult decision facing the allies will be resolution of their common dilemma. Since the end of the Cold war, the only consistent consensus among them regarding North Korea has been and remains their shared support for the strategy of deterrence. Tokyo and Seoul want the United States to maintain "forward deployed" conventional military forces in East Asia backed by the US-Japan and US-ROK alliances as well as the US nuclear umbrella. But for North Korea, this Cold War deterrence posture is the essence of the region's nuclear problem and the rationale for its having a "nuclear deterrent capability."

Would the United States, Japan and South Korea eventually agree to dismantle their own nuclear deterrence posture to win North Korea's willingness to do like wise? This may now seem politically impossible for Washington and its allies to do, but we need to recall that the United States had formulated and initiated implementation in 1991 of a phased withdrawal of military forces, including tactical nuclear weapons, from Northeast Asia. The discovery in 1992 of North Korea's clandestine nuclear weapons program halted the withdrawal. But the withdrawal actually resumed during the Bush Administration which transferred infantry units from South Korea to Iraq and in 2007 agreed to move 8,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guam. The United States also withdrew its military forces from Southeast Asia after Vietnam was reunified in 1975. That withdrawal was done gradually over the subsequent 15 years. Although similarly considered "impossible," it became possible once Washington had reordered its strategic priorities. In other words, any decision to dismantle the US nuclear deterrence posture in Northeast Asia will be a difficult and politically charged matter not just in Washington, but also Tokyo and Seoul.

Ultimately, however, it may prove vital to achieve the Korean Peninsula's verifiable denuclearization.

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