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WHAT IS TO BE DONE FOR THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR RESOLUTION?

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Abstract

First, the six-party talks participant states should acknowledge, more than anything else, the fact that the North Korean nuclear problem will not be solved unless North Korea is persuaded to give it up. Therefore, some critical changes should be made in their current policies for that purpose. In this context, it is extremely important to provide North Korea with something that will substantially remove North Korea's worries about security threats coming from the United States and about energy needs.

Second, the United States should provide leadership in conducting a comprehensive give-and-take deal through bilateral, direct talks with North Korea within or even outside the six-party talks.

Third, the six-party talks participant states should urgently restore a mechanism that will control North Korea's nuclear-related actions and activities. In this context, it is utmost important to restore a freeze option for the North Korean nuclear programs lest North Korea should accumulate reprocessed plutonium any further.

Fourth, both the United States and South Korea should seek and prepare for summit talks with North Korea and make sure that North Korea will use nuclear card only for instrumental purposes in order to obtain security assurance, diplomatic normalization, and economic and energy cooperation. In this context, the United States should encourage, not discourage, South Korea to hold summit talks with North Korea. In preparation of the summit talks, high-level envoys should be appointed and exchanged.

Fifth, South Korea should strengthen its negotiations with North Korea including an inter-Korean summit talks even independently in case the United States opposes them.

Lastly, both the United States and South Korea should make clear what their policy goals are in the North Korean nuclear problem in order to gain public support: nonproliferation or regime change? South Korea will have to go even independently if the U.S. policy does not help solve the North Korean nuclear problem and shows the divergence in national interests.

1. North Korean Nuclear Problem: An Assessment

The North Korean nuclear problem does not show any light at the end of the tunnel as we are not making any significant progress in the six-party talks or other negotiations between the United States and North Korea. In a stark contrast to the growing likelihood of North Korea's expansion of nuclear arsenal, the North Korean nuclear issue has been practically left aside and ignored by the U.S. and North Korean governments. The North Korean nuclear issue has taken a back seat in Washington, D.C. in view of the policy priorities of Iraq and Iran, and the North Korean government has been accumulating reprocessed plutonium in quantity for the expansion of its nuclear arsenal.

If North Korea consolidates its nuclear capability and proves to be a nuclear power state, the United States will fail to achieve the goal of denuclearizing North Korea and achieving nonproliferation of

weapons of mass destruction in Northeast Asia. This will be a serious blow to the foreign and security policy that Bush administration pursued since the September 11.

The stake South Korea holds in the North Korean nuclear issue is much more serious and grave in kind than that of other six-party talks participant countries including the United States, Japan, China, and Russia. If the North Korean nuclear problem is not solved, North Korea will be a nuclear power state; then South Korea not only cannot achieve its proclaimed policy goal of “no tolerance of North Korean nuclear weapons and weapons programs” but also will have to go through a devastating restructuring of the inter-Korean relations that has evolved in favor of the South.

Recently, South Koreans have shown growing discontent at the lack of the political will of the U.S. government to solve the North Korean nuclear problem and expressed even serious doubts about the U.S. intention and ability in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue. The most serious kind of South Koreans’ misgivings about the U.S. policy toward North Korea and the North Korean nuclear problem is whether the U.S. government will tolerate North Korean nuclear weapons and weapons programs, considering the seemingly losing situation where North Koreans have been reprocessing more and more plutonium for its nuclear arsenal.

A nuclear North Korea is absolutely unthinkable and unacceptable for South Korea. Other six-party talks participant states appear to have been disillusioned by now at the lack of United States’ political will, ability, and leadership in achieving nonproliferation of North Korean nuclear weapons and weapons programs. They are questioning the assumption of the U.S. policy that joint pressure on North Korea will make North Korea give in and the validity of the U.S. judgment that the reason North Korea has not surrendered until now is just because there has not been enough pressure on North Korea in one coherent voice. South Korea and China demand that the United States exercise flexibility. They are asking where U.S. leadership is.

2. The Initiatives Taken by North Korea and the United States

One characteristic of what happened since U.S. Presidential envoy James Kelly’s visit to Pyongyang in October 2002 is that there have been changes in which party took what kind of initiative of what character between the United States and North Korea. The U.S. move to reveal North Korea’s clandestine highly-enriched uranium program and to press North Korea to dismantle was applauded by many as something the United States could be credited for, but it actually deprived the U.S. government of the then existing control mechanism of North Korea’s nuclear activities by making North Korea stop honoring the 1994 Agreed Framework, withdraw from the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, and expel IAEA inspectors and inspecting cameras from the Yongbyon nuclear site. In defiance, North Korea immediately took measures to defreeze its nuclear facilities that had been frozen under the Agreed Framework.

Such move by the United States posed a huge problem for the United States, South Korea, and others. The question now was whether the United States could prevent North Korea from going nuclear when there was any control mechanism installed for curbing North Korea's nuclear actions and activities any longer. Unfortunately, the dominant answer appeared to be "no." The next question that was asked was what kind of options are left for the United States, South Korea, and others when it was not possible to prevent North Korea from going nuclear any more. The answer was more or less that what the United States could do was to prevent the transfer of the fissile materials and nuclear weapons technology" out of North Korea to terrorists and/or terrorism-sponsoring countries. This was fundamentally a structural dilemma the United States and South Korea faced in the North Korean nuclear problem after James Kelly's pompous visit to North Korea.

The U.S. policy turned out to be a failure when North Korea declared on February 10, 2005 of its manufacturing and possession of nuclear weapons, its intention to expand the nuclear arsenal, and its decision not to return to the six-party talks until certain conditions are met by the U.S. actions. This "February 10, 2005 announcement" by North Korea immediately put the ball in the U.S. court, placing the United States in the defense since it did not have any problem-solving strategy and effective countermeasures against North Korea's destructive initiative of this kind.

The United States had to find a way to manage the nuclear crisis caused by the offensive initiative taken by North Korea. In recognition of the impossibility for both the United States and North Korea to achieve their fundamental policy goals toward the other side—that is, the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction on a global scale for the United States, and security assurances and normalization of the relations and economic cooperation for North Korea—if they fail to reach an agreement at the six-party talks, both parties could reach a compromise solution as expressed in the six-nation joint statement at the fourth round of the six-party talks in Beijing. South Korea, of course, played an important role in bringing both the United States and North Korea to the negotiation table.

The joint statement issued at the fourth round of the six-party talks on September 19, 2005 was a success for the United States in "managing the North Korean nuclear crisis" caused by the February 10, 2005 announcement. The United States now seized the initiative in the North Korean nuclear issue by installing a multilateral framework that could contain North Korea's nuclear-related actions and activities at least politically, though not legally. However, the initiative taken by the United States appeared not to implement the joint statement faithfully but to attempt at regime change and system collapse in North Korea by accusing North Korea as a criminal state and by levying sanctions on North Korea's international financial transactions.

This initiative taken by the U.S. government appears to be increasingly frustrating since it has not helped bring North Korea to the nuclear negotiation table despite U.S. argument that financial sanctions and six-party talks are two separate things. Considering that the North Korean nuclear problem will not

be solved unless North Korea itself willingly and positively engages in a real negotiation down the road toward a verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of its nuclear weapons and weapons programs, one can legitimately argue that it makes much more sense strategically for problem solving to acknowledge the clear limits of the hitherto policies, methods, and incentives employed the United States to the nuclear resolution.

3. Key Problems and Issues

What is wrong with the U.S. policy toward North Korea and vice versa? What is at issue in the six-party talks? What can possibly explain North Korea's rather stubborn posture to not to return to the six-party talks? How do the U.S.-China relations influence the Korean issues including the North Korean nuclear problem?

First, recently, the United States has taken some tough measures including financial sanction on North Korea to press North Korea to take some positive actions. Even though there are some indications that North Korea is suffering significantly from this punitive financial measure, but it appears not to be sufficient to break up the deadlock of confrontation and muddling through. The United States is trying to buy time in the North Korean nuclear issue in order to deal with other more urgent problems in Iraq and Iran.

The problem, however, is that such policy of buying time may not mitigate and solve an increasingly catastrophic dynamics of the North Korean nuclear crisis going on underneath the confrontation between the two. Buying time may mean wasting time, and it may simply postpone the problem unsolved to an increasingly dangerous and explosive level in such a way that the current policy may have to face disaster and be responsible for the failure to achieve nuclear nonproliferation in North Korea. The more the United States procrastinates and loses time, the more likely North Korea can consolidate itself as a nuclear power state.

Second, the U.S. policy appears to have serious problems in its key assumptions, evaluations, and predictions. More than anything else, the Bush administration appears to assume that if the United States and its six-party partners put collective pressure on North Korea, it will give in and unilaterally abandon its nuclear program. Furthermore, the Bush administration seems to comprehend that North Korea has not given in so far because the six-party participant states have not exerted sufficient pressure in quantity and in kind. In addition, the U.S. government is not ready to admit the existing conflicts of interests and potential ruptures among the six-party talks participants about what steps should be taken next, especially when the United States employs negative, punitive measures against North Korea.

North Korea's February 10, 2005 announcement clearly highlighted what was wrong with the U.S. policy in dealing with the North Korean nuclear problem. The United States, however, appears that it has never given up the rosy future of the six-party talks and the effect of collective pressure on North

Korea. All of these indicate that the United States has never properly and fully taken North Korea's interests, intentions, and nuclear capabilities into account, let alone those of other countries.

Third, a muddling-through policy by the United States in the North Korean nuclear issue is a reflection of lack or failure of achieving consensus in the foreign and security policy making body of the U.S. government. The conflicts of interest and policy line among the policy makers in Washington, D.C. have been visible in agreeing on the text of the September 19, 2005 joint statement and visible more catastrophically in implementing the joint statement.

Another problem associated with the United States' muddling-through policy applied to the North Korean nuclear problem when it is pursued in the absence of any effective problem-solving means has to do with the fact that the neoconservatives and ultra rights in Washington, D.C. are disproportionately under the heavy influence of their ideological and philosophical thrust and impulse in dealing with the practical policy issues. This ideology-laden policy making does not help them fully grasp the fundamentals of how real politics and policy making are conducted in the North Korean political system. The U.S. policy toward North Korea in the North Korean nuclear problem is a case of an excess of ideology and ignorance combined.

Fourth, there is an "asymmetry" of demands and objectives between the United States and North Korea in implementing the September 19, 2005 joint statement in terms of what could be obtained and lost by both sides. Put differently, North Korea from the very start has to begin a process of dismantling its nuclear weapons and nuclear programs in the eyes of the North Korean leadership, a process of losing what it physically possesses, while the U.S. fundamentally does not lose what it has in such a fashion. For that reason, North Korea's strong defensive was expressed via its Foreign Ministry spokesman's statement just after the joint statement in such harsh contrast with the U.S. offensive in terms of sequencing the demands and objectives of both sides in implementing the joint statement.

Aware of this asymmetry, North Korea has taken a tenacious and self-assertive posture in the second nuclear crisis much more than in the first one. The lesson North Korea learned from the first nuclear crisis in the early 1990s was that it will never be deceived or betrayed by the United States again. North Koreans argue that they had to pay an extremely high cost of keeping promise made in the 1994 Agreed Framework by losing huge electricity incurred by the freeze of nuclear power generation program at Yongbyon when it needed electricity and energy more than ever.

The differences in attitude and policy in conducting the nuclear negotiations with the United States loom large if North Korea's first and second nuclear crises are compared. North Koreans appear to have thought that the best way not to be deceived again by the United States and to protect their national interests was to achieve its policy goal based on the principle of "simultaneous action" between the two countries at each and every step. What characterizes North Korea's action or behavior in the second nuclear crisis is that the North Korean leadership is absolutely resolved to effectively achieve its policy goals even if it takes time, defying whatever criticism it receives from others for the time being.

Fifth, in January this year, Chairman Kim Jong Il visited the Southern provinces of China and strongly hinted that a significant change will be made in North Korea's survival strategy in terms of how to proceed with the two top priorities—national security and economic development. As is the case for any country, achieving national security and economic development are two of the vital tasks for North Korea. For the maximum benefit, both tasks should go hand in hand; however, in the case of North Korea, economic recovery and development have been heavily constrained by the developments in the security arena, particularly those related to the United States.

The North Korean leadership has sought nuclear resolution through the September 19, 2005 joint statement, thereby achieving security assurances from the United States and enhancing economic performances at home simultaneously. The policy of the U.S. government since the joint statement, however, was rather a policy of seeking regime change and system collapse in North Korea by accusing North Korea of committing illegal activities. This means that North Korea as “a criminal state” was even subject to the United States’ “law enforcement.”

North Korea appears to have made a strategic choice to temporarily de-link accomplishing economic development from achieving national security. It meant a shift in strategy for survival from seeking simultaneous achievement of national security—including improved relationship with the United States—and economic recovery and development. This could be called a sort of “separation of economics from politics.” North Korea must have decided to lessen its suffering from the unfavorable international security environment that seriously incapacitated North Korea to meet the need for economic recovery and development at home.

In this context, North Korea appears to have already positioned itself toward the United States: if the United States cooperates with North Korea in implementing the September 19, 2005 joint statement, then North Korea will cooperate in denuclearizing itself as promised in the joint statement; however, if the United States does not cooperate, then North Korea will continue to possess nuclear weapons and weapons programs and increase nuclear arsenal as a protection from the U.S. nuclear and military threat. Meantime, North Korea appears to have been preparing for more reform and opening in its economy and seeking Chinese and South Korean economic cooperation more aggressively and urgently.

Sixth, U.S.-China relations constrain what happens in the Korean peninsula including the North Korean nuclear issue. The tension we see between the United States and China has to do with a strategic rivalry in the newly-shaping international order, which produced “divide lines” in security and economic areas despite the need to continue economic cooperation between the two for the foreseeable future. If the U.S.-China relationship improves, both could agree more easily on what has to be done for the North Korean nuclear resolution. China is seriously doubtful about the long-term U.S. strategic design over China and is wary of the goal of U.S. policy. The United States has continued to press China to exercise more influence on North Korea to make sure North Korea come back to the negotiation table and make concessions first, but the conflict of interests between the United States and China has not helped solve

the North Korean nuclear problem as much as the United States wanted..

The problem is whether we should criticize China for not being more willing and forthcoming in line with what the United States wants it to be. It would be unfair if the United States continues to accuse China for not applying enough pressure to North Korea when it does not make its own policy more flexible and accommodating other countries' demands including those of China and South Korea.

4. Solutions: Policy Recommendations

What is to be done for the resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem? Here are several policy recommendations.

First, the six-party talks participant states should acknowledge, more than anything else, the fact that the North Korean nuclear problem will not be solved unless North Korea is persuaded to give it up. Therefore, some critical changes should be made in their current policies for that purpose. In this context, it is extremely important to provide North Korea with something that will substantially remove North Korea's worries about security threat coming from the United States and about energy needs. Any negotiator in the six-party talks would know by now that North Korea absolutely perceives any unilateral concession on its part as disarmament of itself and that the six-party talks in its current format and proceedings will not get anywhere unless the U.S. and others take cooperative measures. It is always important to remember that the Korean War has not ended officially yet, and North Korea tends to regard the United States as an enemy state North Korea is still in a war with.

Second, the United States should provide leadership in conducting a comprehensive give-and-take deal through bilateral, direct talks with North Korea within or even outside the six-party talks. How many of the experts and negotiators believe that the current U.S. policy will solve the North Korean nuclear problem and achieve the goal of nonproliferation on the Korean Peninsula? Not many in my opinion.

Third, the six-party talks participant states should urgently restore a mechanism that will control North Korea's nuclear-related actions and activities. In this context, it is utmost important to restore a freeze option for the North Korean nuclear programs lest North Korea should accumulate reprocessed plutonium any further. It is absolutely critical to stop North Korea's further accumulation of the reprocessed plutonium. The more North Korea has nuclear bombs, the more difficult it will be to dismantle North Korea's nuclear arsenal.

Fourth, both the United States and South Korea should seek and prepare for summit talks with North Korea and make sure that North Korea will use nuclear card only for instrumental purposes in order to obtain security assurance, diplomatic normalization, and economic and energy cooperation. In this context, the United States should encourage, not discourage, South Korea to hold summit talks with North Korea. In preparation of the summit talks, high-level envoys should be appointed and exchanged. An

idea of establishing a direct negotiation channel between the two Koreas has gained support among South Koreans since the second-term Bush administration has failed to show any flexibility in its North Korea policy, and no new, effective solutions have otherwise emerged. Under these circumstances, the logical choice left for South Korea is to open a direct inter-Korean channel for nuclear negotiation. An inter-Korean channel could be a support channel for U.S. efforts to achieve the goal of nonproliferation in North Korea.

Fifth, South Korea should strengthen its negotiations with North Korea including an inter-Korean summit talks even independently in case the United States opposes them. The dilemma for the six-party talks participant states that have faithfully cooperated with the United States in the North Korean nuclear negotiations either out of U.S. pressure or voluntary cooperation was that their agreement with the United States on increasing joint pressure on North Korea in one voice did not necessarily lead to North Korea's concessions; it rather produced the opposite outcome of North Korea's announcement of going nuclear in resolute defiance of the collective pressure.

Lastly, both the United States and South Korea should make clear what their policy goals are in the North Korean nuclear problem in order to gain public support: nonproliferation or regime change? South Korea will have to go even independently if the U.S. policy does not help solve the North Korean nuclear problem and shows the divergence in national interests. There is a real danger that the growing gap or discrepancy between their proclaimed policy goals and their actually-obtainable goals may cause unbearable psychological tension and hurt the credibility of the policy itself. There is growing criticism in South Korea that South Korea's policy, which is pursued through a close consultation and cooperation with the United States, may not prevent North Korea from going nuclear.

The United States should be mindful of all of these, but what is most important for the U.S. is to know that South Korea and other U.S. allies and friends alike seek more than ever a more flexible, accommodating, and problem-solving U.S. leadership for an early and peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis.