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Revisiting the North Korea Issue

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Speculation surrounding the veracity of reports about North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's health problems, coupled with Pyongyang's recent move toward restarting activity at a nuclear reprocessing plant, has once again rendered the future of the North Korean issue unclear. Worse, the effects of these developments have been exacerbated by developments elsewhere in the world. Dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang is expected to stagnate as the United States enters the final stretch of its presidential election campaign, and the new South Korean administration has yet to consolidate its policy toward North Korea. The future of Japan–North Korea relations, beginning with the abductees issue, is also unclear in the context of Prime Minister Fukuda's abrupt resignation and the subsequent transition to the new Aso administration, as well as the snap general election that is widely expected to be called sometime in the next several weeks.

It is within this environment of uncertainty that we take another look at the North Korea issue.

North Korea's Changing Neighborhood

Over the past 20 years, the strategic environment in which North Korean leaders have sought to ensure the survival of the current regime has dramatically worsened. Changes abound: North Korea's economy is in tatters, Russia has lost its military and political influence, South Korea has democratized and achieved economic prosperity, and China is growing in leaps and bounds as a result of its decision to deepen mutual interdependence with the international community. The US attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq certainly sent shivers down the spines of North Korean leaders. In 2006, North Korea test fired missiles and carried out a nuclear test in an attempt to demonstrate its military capabilities and gain leverage in its relations with the United States. At the same time, it has also occasionally adopted a seemingly constructive approach in order to create an advantageous environment in its relations with the United States and ensure the survival of the current regime. This latter approach is manifest in its efforts to cooperate with South Korea under the "Sunshine

Policy,” normalize diplomatic relations with Europe, and improve relations with Japan (as seen in bilateral summit meetings in 2002 and 2004).

Policy Options

The United States and Japan basically have two policy options through which to address the North Korea issue. The first option is to adopt a confrontational approach that essentially aims to isolate the regime and wait for it to collapse. This approach would involve, among other things, implementing severe sanctions against North Korea. Unfortunately, however, North Korea is not a country that will respond positively to sanctions. On the contrary, sanctions are almost certain to lead Pyongyang to pursue a policy of brinkmanship, which will necessitate further sanctions and lead to a vicious cycle of escalation.

It goes without saying that any approach toward North Korea would be ineffective without the military option on the table. Current circumstances are similar to those during the first nuclear crisis in 1993 and 1994, and as tensions rise to extreme levels we must be prepared to manage a possible crisis. However, two things must not be overlooked: the very heavy price that North Korea’s neighbors, including Japan, would end up paying in the event of a military conflict; and the fact that South Korea, China, and Russia are unlikely to support such a confrontational approach. It should also be pointed out that any sanctions are bound to be ineffective without the cooperation of these three countries.

In light of these circumstances, it is clear that the other option—a diplomatic solution through proactive negotiations—is the only realistic choice at present. Diplomacy must always be carried out with an objective in mind, and in the case of the North Korea issue the objective is clear: ensure that North Korea abandons its nuclear weapons and no longer poses a threat to the international community.

Unfortunately, however, achieving this objective will certainly take time. As long as the current regime continues to rule North Korea, countries involved in negotiations with it would be well advised to look upon any commitment from Pyongyang

with a certain degree of skepticism. North Korea can hardly be expected to easily give up its nuclear weapons, which at present serve as its most valuable diplomatic leverage. As such, the patience of all nations involved will be indispensable.

The diplomatic approach should have two central goals: preventing circumstances from worsening and advancing moves toward a gradual resolution. To achieve these goals, a process must be undertaken to ensure that North Korea ceases stockpiling plutonium, refrains from transferring nuclear technology to other countries or terrorists, never again participates in or supports terrorist activities or abductions, stops transactions in counterfeit currencies and drugs, and ultimately is left with no choice but to make the strategic decision to abandon its nuclear weapons. Although this will undoubtedly be an arduous and time-consuming process, the good news is that the appropriate framework for making progress toward nuclear verification and—ultimately—denuclearization already exists: the Six-Party Talks.

All of the nations involved in the Six-Party Talks have a shared interest in seeing that North Korea’s nuclear program, which has the potential to disrupt prosperity in the region, is stopped. It is abundantly clear that Pyongyang seeks a security guarantee as one condition of an agreement. In the view of the North Korean leadership, this security guarantee should be supported by all five nations, not only the United States, and include the following: a promise that the United States will not unilaterally attack North Korea, a commitment from the United States and Japan to take steps to normalize diplomatic relations, measures to advance economic and energy cooperation, and joint efforts to negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

This framework presents something of a historical anomaly in international relations. Typically, a country would be expected to first alter its antagonistic policies and meet certain minimal conditions for behavior before the international community would offer its support. However, this is not the case for North Korea. After merely agreeing in principle to the objective of eventual denuclearization and

making a commitment to participate in a phased process, North Korea is supposed to receive assistance from the five nations. As long as this approach continues, North Korea can be expected to make various excuses, delay measures, and even attempt to stop the entire process. There are a fair number of reasons for outsiders to be skeptical of its commitments thus far. Normalization of relations with foreign nations and economic and energy cooperation will inevitably lead to an influx of foreigners and information, which could in turn weaken the regime's ability to exercise complete control over the movement of people and information and monopolize the means of production. Because these developments could bring an end to the current regime, many experts suspect that North Korea has no intention of seriously implementing the agreement and is stalling for time.

Even if North Korea is merely stalling for time, there are two reasons that the involved nations should nevertheless continue this approach. First and foremost, there really is no other rational option. Second, it is still possible that this process could bear fruit in the future. North Korea's national strength is declining rapidly as a result of its domestic economic circumstances, and it is increasingly doubtful that the regime will be able to survive without substantial outside assistance. The current leadership in Pyongyang seems to have realized that cooperation with foreign countries will be an essential part of efforts to carry out necessary economic reforms. Additionally, whether or not rumors circulating about Kim Jong-il's poor health are true, the fact remains that his regime will not last forever.

As this process moves forward, we will eventually reach a point when North Korea will have no choice but to decide for itself whether or not it will abandon its nuclear weapons. After all, its leaders seek to normalize diplomatic relations with the United States and Japan, and it is difficult to imagine that either of those states would agree to normalize ties with a nuclear-armed North Korea. Under any circumstances, we must recognize that negotiations with North Korea will not bear fruit without an appropriate mixture of dialogue and pressure. To

this end, it is imperative that the five nations form a united front.

In the long term, the Six-Party Talks framework is integral to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Japan, the United States, China, Russia, and the two Koreas all share a direct interest in regional stability, and there is no reason for the framework's mandate to be limited to negotiations over the nuclear issue. It also has an important role to play in overseeing the implementation of an eventual agreement and should continue to exist as a semi-permanent organization tasked with facilitating cooperation among the six nations.

Overcoming Obstacles to Japan's Full Involvement

North Korea's past abduction of Japanese citizens has become an extremely delicate issue in Japan. Partially as a result of the political sensitivity of this issue, Japan's approach to the Six-Party Talks has lacked clear direction. Japanese leaders need to fundamentally adjust their approach to the issue.

Neither leaving the abductees issue unsettled nor temporarily shelving the matter in order to normalize relations with North Korea is a feasible policy option for Japan. It was exactly this lack of options that led Japan to carry out intense behind-the-scenes diplomacy with North Korea several years ago. Negotiations culminated in a 2002 summit meeting and the Pyongyang Declaration. North Korea formally acknowledged that the abductions had taken place and allowed five survivors to return to Japan. Later, an agreement was formulated through the Six-Party Talks that reiterated that diplomatic normalization between Japan and North Korea would be carried out in a manner consistent with the Pyongyang Declaration. The basic concept of this aspect of the "comprehensive resolution" is that without a resolution of the abductees issue there will be no normalization and without normalization there will be no final resolution of the nuclear issue.

Progress in resolving the abductees issue will come along with further progress toward a resolution of the nuclear issue. Conversely, there may be no progress on the abductees issue if negotiations

concerning the nuclear issue stall. Thus, in addition to strengthening linkages with the other nations involved in the Six-Party Talks and working with them to resolve the nuclear issue, Japan must also push forward comprehensive bilateral negotiations that cover more than only the abductees issue.

If the focus of these negotiations is restricted solely to the abductees issue, however, there will be little hope for a breakthrough. Rather, Japan must elucidate for North Korea why it is in Pyongyang's interest to seek progress on both the nuclear and abductees issues. Because history tells us that achieving substantive outcomes from negotiations with North Korea is impossible without the direct involvement of the state leader, Japan should—under the right circumstances—consider linking comprehensive negotiations to a possible third Japan–North Korea summit meeting.

It is also important for Japan to clarify what exactly a resolution of the abductees issue would entail. The primary precondition for a resolution is “verification of the facts.” The North Korean side must provide detailed and verifiable information

detailing how many Japanese were abducted and what happened to them. It must also promptly return any victims who are still alive. Japanese police and—depending on the circumstances—international institutions should be involved in this process. Determining what happened to the abductees in a verifiable manner will open the door to a final resolution of the issue.

Conclusion

While it is understandable that governments involved in the Six-Party Talks have become distracted by domestic political affairs in recent months, it is imperative that they keep their eye on the ball. The North Korea issue is simply too important to be relegated to the back burner. A diplomatic resolution to the North Korea issue will remove arguably the most dangerous flashpoint in Northeast Asia and make a substantial contribution to peace and stability in the region.

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